CONSTRUCTING MEANING THROUGH PHOTO-PRODUCTION: DEATH AND LOSS IN POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Many post-secondary students will experience the death of a close family member or friend and making meaning of such tragedies is particularly challenging for this population. A lack of perceived emotional support is salient among post-secondary students. Understanding how post-secondary students communicate about their loss is essential to the development of adequate interventions that will help provide them with emotional support while grieving.

Today, many students use social media to visually document their lives and share such experiences publicly. Most attempts to understand students' experience of loss have neglected to examine other representations of grief, such as the use of photography.

The current research examined loss within the post-secondary population using a photo-production methodology to understand the discourse of female students, analyse the utility of a photo-production methodology, and explore the visual data produced in interviews. The research was completed in three studies: study one examined verbal data produced by bereaved female students (n = 10) in interview; study two included data collected from interviews and follow-up questionnaires from a sample of both male and female students (n = 16); and study three focused exclusively on the photographs (n = 160) produced by students from study two. This research was informed by a social constructionist epistemology.

The results of this research suggest that many participants used a sanitised script to communicate their loss experience. For participants, the sanitised version of their lived experience was valuable and effective as it facilitated support and acceptance from their peer group. The photo-production methodology allowed participants the freedom to choose what they contributed to the research project, increasing their locus of control, and enabling a positively transformative process. The photographs produced for the research project were widely diverse

in their structure and content. The photographs also elicited emotional and cognitive reactions in the observer. An overall examination of the verbal and visual data together suggested that participants sought meaning for their loss in the research interviews and many students were looking to solve issues related to grief. As a result, the research methodology was beneficial for these students.

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DEDICATION

This text is dedicated to my mother and father, both of whom experienced loss in their early years yet showed me courage. My research was inspired by the lessons in love and loss that I received from my parents.

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CHAPTER 1

Constructing Meaning Through Photo-Production: Death and Loss in Post-Secondary Students

This chapter is an introduction to the research project and provides basic definitions and terminology used throughout this dissertation. The general epistemological assumptions used in this dissertation are included in this chapter in conjunction with a statement regarding personal reflexivity. A brief overview of the existing theories of grief and research pertaining to loss in post-secondary populations is provided. The overarching rationale for the research project and the individual aims of each study are also described.

1.1 Definitions and Terminology

1.1.1 Loss

The term 'loss' is used to refer to the experience of loss through death. This term does not include other, viable losses such as loss of employment, housing, or identity.

1.1.2 Grief

The term 'grief' is defined as an individual experience or reaction to loss. This may include emotional, cognitive, behavioural, spiritual, or physiological responses.

1.1.3 Bereaved

The term 'bereaved' is used to refer to an individual who has experienced a loss through death.

1.1.4 Mourning

The term 'mourning' includes common cultural practices that are often observable or public to others.

1.1.5 Photo-method

The term ‘photo-method’ refers to any methodology that uses photographs in research. Photo-methods are commonly used in sociology and anthropology (Harper, 2002), for the purposes of program evaluation (Wang & Burris 1994), as a qualitative research methodology (Carlsson, 2001; Phoenix, 2010), and to enhance research interviews (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Harrison, 2002). Although the different terminologies used to describe photo-methods are often mistakenly used interchangeably, the theoretical assumptions of these methods vary greatly.

1.1.6 Photo-production

The term ‘photo-production’ refers to a methodology that requires participants to capture photographs on their own for the purpose of the research study (Reavey, 2011).

1.1.7 Discourse Analysis

The term ‘discourse analysis’ refers to the method of analysing text. In discourse analysis, the focus is on the function of language that occurs within a social context.

1.1.8 Thematic Analysis

The term ‘thematic analysis’ refers to the method of analysing data for the purposes of identifying and reporting patterns within a data set.

1.2 Epistemology

I used a social constructionist epistemology to approach the research project. According to the social constructionist ontology, there is no truly objective or universal truth beyond that which we have created in our social worlds (Crotty, 1998). The creation of human knowledge as we know it is limited. Thus, the meaning derived from the phenomenon under study was constructed in part by the research process and the researcher-participant relationship (Hays &

Singh, 2012). Knowledge is constructed from our social relationships and is therefore, socially situated.

I made the following assumptions about the data that were grounded in the social constructionist epistemology: (1) our understanding of grief is a product of our culture, history, and times; (2) knowledge and meaning are constructed from social interactions and from interactions with objects in our worlds. The institutions in which we are rooted, therefore, largely shape our knowledge of grief; and (3) constructions of the world will, then, foster some social actions within the researcher-participant relationship while omitting others including those social actions common to the bereaved (Burr, 2003; Crotty, 1998).

1.3 Theories of Grief

1.3.1 Breaking Bonds

Theories of grief have evolved over the last century. From stages and tasks to models, many researchers have developed theories in an attempt to generalize the experience of grief across bereaved individuals. In early writings, Freud (1922) described grief as a natural and normal process. Indeed, he posited that those who are grieving need time to mourn and time to sever their attachment to the deceased. Freud argued that a fixed amount of energy that was once invested (cathected) in a loved one needed to be retrieved (decathected) before the bereaved person could be free to re-invest in someone or something else. Although Freud acknowledged "normal" mourning, he also described a "pathological" reaction to the loss of a loved one, which he described as similar to the symptoms of melancholia (Clewell, 2004).

According to several researchers, Freud's theory of grief was largely influenced by both his personal experience with death and the time period in which he wrote about death (Clewell, 2004; Shapiro, 1996). For Freud, the post-war era resulted in loss on a global, catastrophic scale

(Gay, 1988). His writing reflected this, as he pathologised normal grief (i.e., melancholia) and asserted that grief ends when the relationship to the deceased was entirely severed. Although in his early writings Freud believed that grief was resolved by letting go or breaking the bond with the deceased, his attitude was said to later shift. When grieving the death of his grandson, Freud acknowledged that some losses are simply irreconcilable (Shapiro, 1996).

1.3.1.1 Stages of dying. Perhaps one of the most recognized theories of grief today is that which was proposed by Kübler-Ross (1969). In this classic work, Kübler-Ross reported on over 400 interviews that focused on the reactions of persons who were dying. She concluded that most of these participants passed through five stages in the time between their initial awareness of their illness and their death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, Wessler, & Avioli, 1972). If we focus specifically on the stage of acceptance, Kübler -Ross described this stage as an absence of feelings, that is, in acceptance, people disengage from life.

It is important to note that, although often referred to as a stage model, there is little evidence that Kübler-Ross intended this to be linear stages of change. In fact, it is a model about coping with dying, not grieving the death of a loved one. Yet this model has co-opted from being a model dealing with dying to a general model of grieving. Other scholars have been critical of this co-opting as an over-generalisation (Corr & Corr, 2012). While many dispute the details and or meaning of this work, its importance still lies in the fact that it opened up the study of the dying, so that the ill were seen as people still alive and that they had needs which they wanted to address. Despite these advancements, researchers have identified limitations to the model including a lack of independent confirmation of the model, a lack of research evidence beyond the initial publication, and that the model does not sufficiently capture the complexity of grief (Corr & Corr, 2012).

1.3.1.2 Grief tasks model. Nearly a decade later, Worden (1983) proposed four tasks to resolve and work through grief: to accept the reality of the loss, to work through the pain of grief, to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missed, and to withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in another relationship. Similar to Freud, the fourth task emphasized letting go of the bond to the deceased by disengaging emotionally and moving on to another relationship. However, Worden (2008) dropped the notion of reinvesting in another relationship in a third revision of the text, and substituted it with emotionally relocate the deceased. Such changes came at a time when Worden (2008), like other researchers, began the study of children's coping with grief and considered the role of attachment. To emotionally relocate no longer seemed to be a de-vesting or withdrawal. Rather it was a moving, maybe not towards, but certainly not away, from the deceased and the memory of them.

1.3.2 Continuing Bonds

Thus far, the work of grief, its resolution, or what has come to be called "grief work" was a letting go or a breaking of the bond with the deceased. The severing of the emotional connection was seen as the healthy resolution to grief. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) challenged the idea that the purpose of grief was to sever the bond with the deceased. In their writings, the authors emphasized how continuing bonds are a healthy part of recovery. Indeed, the role of grief work was to find ways to maintain a connection with the deceased, construct and reconstruct new connections, and maintain a relationship with the deceased person.

In this sense, continuing bonds is a healthy process of adaptation and change in the post-death relationship that constructs and reconstructs a new connection to the deceased. The goal of grief work becomes movement towards the deceased in an attempt to engage in the relationship in a new and ongoing manner. Indeed, ties to the deceased are encouraged by supporting the

ongoing communication to, and about, the deceased. Rituals that continue the bond are also promoted. Grund and Chartier (1998) surveyed 16 different articles and books on the topic of continuing bonds and identified 10 dimensions used to maintain a connection with a deceased loved one. The 10 dimensions described by the authors included visiting the grave, positive interchanges (finding it soothing to dialogue with the deceased), anticipated reunion (comfort that the survivor will re-join their loved one in the future), reminiscing (recalling the past positively), use of linking objects (consoled by possessions and objects that belonged to the deceased), expressions of love, becoming a living legacy (adopting characteristics or behaviours of the deceased), experiencing presence, ongoing influence (making decisions and feeling guided by the deceased), and dreaming of the deceased (Grund & Chartier, 1998).

1.3.3 Meaning Making

Neimeyer (2000) systematically identified propositions to support the notion of meaning-making in grief. Consistent with the continuing bonds theory (Klass et al., 1996), Neimeyer (2000) argued that grieving does not involve letting go of a loved one; rather it involves a healthy maintenance of continued symbolic bonds. However, unlike traditional models of grief that involve phases or stages that progress to various forms of emotional reaction, Neimeyer reported little direct evidence to support these models as stage-like models of change. Indeed, he suggested that there is no normative pattern of change in grief and he questioned whether emotional responses should be the primary focus of grief theories.

According to the meaning-making theory proposed by Neimeyer (2000), grieving is a cognitive process that only supplements emotional processes. Death can significantly contribute to a revision in one's self-identify and, for some, this may be life-enhancing. Such losses may

also alter lived constructions or assumptions about the world in which we function. Indeed, Neimeyer emphasised that coping with loss involves how we relate to others.

1.3.4 Dual Process Model

Based on the lack of empirical evidence and validation of the grief work hypothesis, Stroebe and Schut (1999) introduced an integrative model of grief resolution called the Dual Process Model. The Dual Process Model gathers together a number of contrasting tasks, including acknowledging the reality of the loss *and* acknowledging the reality of a changed world, experiencing the pain of grief *and* taking time off from the pain of grief, adjusting to life without the deceased *and* mastering the changed environment, and, relocating the deceased emotionally or moving on *and* developing new roles, identities, and relationships (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

According to Stroebe and Schut (2010), the death of a loved one elicits particular responses or types of coping that are loss-oriented and restoration-oriented. Loss-orientation refers to directly dealing or processing the loss. It is about the intrusion of grief, or what other researchers have identified as letting go, continuing, or relocating bonds. Emotions in this orientation may range from pleasant reminiscing to painful longing (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Unlike stage theories, in the loss-orientation, emotions may come and go following no particular course. Restoration-orientation refers to a focus, not on an outcome, but on meeting the requirements of life change following the loss. That is, it involves doing new things or mastering tasks formerly done by the deceased, distracting oneself from grief, avoiding if not denying grief, and the assumption of new roles, identities, and relationships (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

Stroebe and Schut (2010) described oscillation as a central component of the Dual Process Model. In oscillation, the bereaved are believed to alternate between loss- and

restoration-oriented coping. For example, at one time the griever will confront the loss; at another time they will avoid their grief. Over time, habituation occurs from the repeated exposure and confrontation, and grief diminishes.

A review of the more prominent theories of grief suggests that healthy grieving is not simply a "moving toward" (continuing the bond) balanced by a "moving away" (breaking the bond) but it is also a "moving forward" or a restoration orientation that involves a new identity. This notion of a new identity is a consistent theme in many of the above theories, but is so diverse that there is no one identity that identifies those who are moving forward.

1.4 Prevalence of Loss in Post-Secondary Students

Many post-secondary students will experience the death of a close family member or friend. Several American researchers have surveyed the rate of bereavement among the college student population. Although they have found different rates, the number of students who reported to be in their first year of bereavement has most often been cited as between 25 (Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010) and 30 percent (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008). The rate of reported bereaved college students increases to 39 (Balk et al., 2010) to 50 percent (Neimeyer et al., 2008) when researchers accounted for those in the first 24 months of bereavement. More recently, Cox and colleagues (2015) reported a rise in the number of bereaved college students on campus when they surveyed students across four years of college enrolment. The researchers found that 60 percent of senior students had lost at least one family member or friend since the end of their first year in college and one in four of those bereaved students reported multiple losses (Cox, Dean, & Kowalski, 2015). Neimeyer and colleagues (2008) have appropriately termed this pattern of bereavement a "silent epidemic" that has spread

across the college campus and resulted in negative academic, social, and psychological outcomes for students across the United States.

1.5 When Young Adults Grieve

Death of loved ones is a naturally occurring event in life and research conducted by Bonanno (2004) has indicated that most individuals are resilient in the face of loss. Although the rate of bereaved post-secondary students suggests that death of a loved one among this population is common, it is likely that the experience of this population is rather unique. The loss experienced by a post-secondary student occurs at a critical time in their development of self-identity (Balk, 2001; Hogan & DeSantis, 1996; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Indeed, making meaning of such tragedies, by integrating death into their evolving life story, is particularly challenging for this population, with violent deaths cited among the most difficult (Neimeyer et al., 2008). In a study conducted by Frazier and colleagues (2009), post-secondary students rated the trauma of an unexpected death of a loved one as the worst event they experienced during their lifetime. Although students cognitively constructed this as the worst event, loss was not quantifiably associated with the amount of distress actually experienced in their lives when compared to distress experienced from other traumatic events (e.g., sexual assault; Frazier et al., 2009). Such findings suggest that loss likely greatly impacts cognitive coping for this population.

1.5.1 Emotional Support

A lack of emotional support has been found to increase the risk of many mental health problems, including complicated grief (Lobb et al., 2010). A lack of perceived emotional support is generally salient among post-secondary students who believe that no one understands them and no one is listening (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

Several authors have argued that grief becomes complicated when individuals are unable to experience normative grieving processes such as participating in common cultural rituals, attending funerals, or mourning the deceased with social support (Balk, Zaengle & Corr, 2011; Leach, Burgess & Holmwood, 2008; Cohen, Mannarino & Knudsen, 2004). Traumatic grief (often used interchangeably with complicated grief – the former reflecting grief following a notably tragic circumstance, the latter referring to grief that does not follow a typical pattern of grief) is characterised by such traits as longing for the deceased, intrusive thoughts about the deceased, hopelessness about the future, numbness and detachment from others, difficulty accepting the death, as well as anger and agitation (Balk et al., 2011; Cohen et al., 2004; Dillen, Fontaine & Verhofstadt-Denève, 2009; Leach et al., 2008; Melhem, Moritz, Walker, Shear & Brent, 2007; Prigerson et al., 1999). Traumatic grief may contribute negatively to various facets of a young adult's psychological well-being including challenges to the development of their self-concept or identity, interpersonal and familial relationships, as well as contribute to poor academic performance (Balk, 1983; 1990; 1991). In a study conducted by Melhem and colleagues (2007), traumatic grief was correlated with suicidal ideation, again highlighting the cognitive impact of loss on this young population.

Researchers have identified factors that contribute to inadequate access to emotional support for post-secondary students. Scholars have noted that while students attend college and university, the geographic distance to their home community prohibits access to their traditional support systems (Fajgenbaum, Chesson, & Lanzi, 2012; Schnider, Elhai, & Gray, 2007). Although other researchers have found that students have used online social networking sites to overcome geographic distance when a loved one dies (Carroll & Landry, 2010), evidence of the benefit of such sites is controversial. A lack of support from peers during grief (Fajgenbaum et

al., 2012) leaves many students feeling disconnected and isolated from their non-grieving peers (Shultz, 2007; Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

In addition to the geographic distance barriers, researchers have found some negative outcomes from peer support. Such negative outcomes include changes to the peer relationship that have been attributed to a lack of knowledge of grief, a lack of skill in dealing with the bereaved (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010), and a lack of empathy (Balk, 1997). Indeed, in one online survey conducted by Tedrick Parikh and Servaty-Seib (2013), non-bereaved peers perceived risks to providing peer support, such as expending time and energy, and general feelings of discomfort discussing the death. Similarly, Balk (1997) wrote that "the common experience of many bereaved students is that their peers become overwhelmed with anxiety when grief enters a room and afraid of the person who is bereaved (p. 208)." Naturally, such attitudes towards grieving individuals have had negative emotional consequences on the bereaved student. In a recent publication, Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) compiled 33 stories written by bereaved post-secondary students and recent graduates. They found that among the writers, each described a feeling of loneliness when others did not understand or relate to their experience. They noted that their loneliness was likely perpetuated by a reluctance to express their grief to their peers so as to avoid being a burden to others (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). In fact, in an earlier study conducted by Balk (1997), he found that 7.2 percent of bereaved students had not talked to anyone about the death they experienced.

Although post-secondary students often report feeling alone and disconnected from others, research by Balk (1997) indicated that many students report a positive experience talking about their loss. In a survey of 994 bereaved undergraduate students, Balk (1997) found that the majority of students reported that talking about the death was very helpful (43.6%) or somewhat

helpful (42.8%) to their bereavement while 12.5 percent reported that it was neither helpful nor unhelpful, leaving less than one percent reporting that talking about the death was unhelpful. Although Balk (1997) found that students talked about the death with their peers, the majority of bereaved students reported that they talked with their mothers about their loss. It is unclear from this study, whether the person they talked to contributed to the perceived benefit of talking about the loss.

1.5.2 Support Groups

The lack of knowledge about grief and the lack of emotional support provided to bereaved post-secondary students has sparked efforts for the development of formal support groups and campus interventions (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). Although some researchers have found that students benefit from weekly bereavement group sessions (Battle, Greer, Ortiz, Hernandez, & Todd, 2013), a U.S. national survey of college counselling centers reported that only 11 percent of eligible students will use formal counselling services (Gallagher, 2014). In fact, in a study by Cox and colleagues (2015) that specifically examined the frequency with which bereaved students used counselling services, including those services outside of campus, the researchers found that 84.6 percent never visited a counsellor. The majority of grieving students (52.1%) faced barriers to seeking and utilizing counselling services including a lack of knowledge on the availability of, and access to, such services, a lack of free time, and the stigma associated with counselling (Cox et al., 2015).

Additional efforts have been made to establish peer-led support groups on campus. Nationwide initiatives in the U.S., such as “Actively Moving Forward” (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012), maintain that grieving students are in need of emotional support from their peers as

opposed to traditional formal support from counsellors. Although such peer-led groups appear beneficial, little is known about the nature of the discourse that occurs between peers.

1.5.3. Gender Differences

Little research has specifically examined differences between bereaved male and female post-secondary students. Although there is ample literature on adolescence and grief, fewer researchers have specifically examined gender within the post-secondary population. Of the few studies that have examined gender, Walker and colleagues (2012) found that female students were more likely to experience negative mental health outcomes when their level of closeness to the deceased was high, compared to male students. The researchers also found that women were more likely to experience reduced motivation (e.g., academic) following a loss (Walker, Hathcoat & Noppe, 2012). The findings presented by Walker and colleagues focused on grief outcomes and did not explore patterns of grief.

The notion that grief is gendered has been examined by Doka and Martin (2010). They argue that grief is best understood on a continuum whereby intuitive and instrumental patterns of grief can account for both male and female responses to loss. Yet many women continue to be regarded as rather gendered in their grief (i.e., openly emotional) and portrayed as such in popular media. Doka and Martin (2010) acknowledge that gender role socialization and culture play a part in the different grieving patterns males and females exhibit. For example, females are taught at a young age to confide in and provide nurturance to others. The researchers argue, however, that the perceived gender differences in grieving patterns are often exaggerated (Doka & Martin, 2010), which likely influences people's expectations of where either gender should fall on the continuum.

1.6 Research Rationale

Grief and loss are difficult experiences to share with others. Unfortunately, many students will experience a loss during their post-secondary studies (Cox et al., 2015), with little to no support. Most attempts to understand students' experience of grief have focused on verbal reports. One area that has been largely omitted from research has been other representations of grief, such as photographs.

Photographs have been used in research for a variety of purposes by different disciplines. Although the use of photography is not a recent one, the limited availability of research literature on the topic suggests that this method is largely underused, particularly so within psychology (Heisley & Levy, 1991). Harper (2002) purported that, as humans, we respond to images differently because our physiological ability to process visual information is evolutionarily older than that of verbal information. As such, images elicit deeper and richer data than words alone (Harper, 2002; Heisley & Levy, 1991). In addition, photographs provide an anchor or common point of reference that is, in some ways, understood by both researcher and participant (Harper, 2002). Indeed, researchers suggest that photo-methods decrease the disparity between the researcher and the researched (Harper, 2002; Heisley & Levy, 1991; Wang & Burris, 1994) while increasing the agency of the participant who chooses the information that they share and how they share it (Reavey, 2011).

There is limited research literature that has examined the use of photo-methods with grieving individuals. Much of the available literature explores the use of post-mortem photography to cope with perinatal loss (Blood & Cacciatore, 2014, Hochberg, 2011; Jones, 2002). Other researchers have explored the way in which reflecting and remembering using

existing photographs can facilitate a continuing bonds relationship with the deceased (Riches & Dawson, 1998) that is ultimately therapeutic (Weiser, 2010).

Although there appears to be a lack of research within this area, grieving individuals have naturally gravitated towards the use of photography when faced with loss. An internet search engine reveals blog posts dedicated to the use of photography to deal with grief (e.g., Photogrief; Journey Through Grief) and photography workshops for grieving parents and siblings (e.g., Beyond Goodbye, Carly Marie Project Heal).

Likewise, therapists have also incorporated visual methods in their treatment of grieving clients. Although research exists to support the use of art therapy for various presenting problems (e.g., children and trauma), little research exists on the use of photography for bereaved young adults. Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) provided a variety of clinical case examples detailing the use of expressive arts with bereaved populations. However, there remains a lack of empirical research dedicated to examining visual methods within the bereaved population.

1.7 Aims of the Research Project

I explored three different dimensions to the data produced in the present research project: (1) a focus on the discourse produced in the interviews with post-secondary student who were bereaved; (2) questions about the photo methodology used to produce the discourse; and (3) the nature of the actual visual data that were captured by the participants. The following is a brief overview of the aims of each individual study.

1.7.1 Study 1

Researchers have argued that we have a limited understanding of grieving college students (Balk, 1997; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010), and, although there has been increased research attention to this population in recent years, to date, no studies have examined the

function of the language university students use to talk about their loss. In fact, most of the literature on bereaved college students is quantitative in nature. Of the few bereavement studies that have used a qualitative methodology, only a select few researchers have used discourse analysis, and only to study online social networking and bereavement (Paulus & Varga, 2015; Varga & Paulus, 2014). None have done so using a photo-production method. The lack of discourse analysis studies to examine bereavement is surprising, given that grief is a socially constructed phenomenon. Therefore, we argue that we must examine the talk that *is* happening amongst post-secondary students in order to bring change to the taboo that is death talk.

Discourse analysis suited our epistemological assumptions and, as a methodology, addressed the purpose of study 1. Discourse analysis examines the function of language, or what people *do* with their talk (Wood & Kroger, 2000). We were most interested in the way in which female university students used talk to navigate their lived experience of loss. In order for us to understand the process involved in the account, we needed to not only identify the broad meaning systems available to the participants and *how* they were used in talk, but also to explore the conflicts that occurred in the process (Potter, 1996; Wetherell & Edley, 2014). It was reasonable then to focus our analysis primarily on how participants discursively constructed the death experience in the interview (Wood & Kroger, 2000).

1.7.2 Study 2

The allure of visual stimuli predates psychological theory and in recent years has undoubtedly become the new form of social interaction among young adults. Indeed, young adults use various photo applications (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook) on a daily basis to communicate with their peers. The purpose of study 2 was to examine how photo-methods can be used to talk about death with university students. That is, this study examined both *what* the

photo-production method enabled bereaved students to do in a research interview and *how* the method did this.

A thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006) suited our epistemological assumptions and research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Often described as an accessible methodology, Braun and Clarke (2012; 2017) state that thematic analysis can allow for the identification, analysis, and reporting of *patterns* within a data set at the interpretive level. According to the researchers, thematic analysis can be used to examine people's *practices* (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Therefore, thematic analysis was used to examine how bereaved individuals *perform* in a research interview using photo-production to elicit dialogue.

1.7.3 Study 3

Young adults increasingly document their lives through photographs and share such images on social media for others to see. Analyzing visual data is a relatively new research methodology (Gleeson, 2011). Within the field of psychology in particular, researchers have focused on how visual methods elicit dialogue from participants. Historically, however, they have failed to systematically analyze the actual visual data in that process (Gibson, Lee & Crabb, 2015; Gleeson, 2011). Relying solely on verbal or written data limits our understanding of complex issues.

Although a few researchers have used existing photographs to examine the experience of grieving individuals (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014), to our knowledge, no studies have examined visual photographs that participants produced for the purposes of illustrating their experience with death. We aimed to examine how death-related loss can be photographed. The purpose of this study was to examine the photographs that were captured by bereaved university

students for the purpose of a research interview using polytextual thematic analysis of visual data (Gleeson, 2011).

1.8 Personal Reflexivity

In keeping with the social constructionist epistemology identified earlier and to support trustworthiness of the research data, it is important to acknowledge that my lived experience cannot be separated from this research project and how it was interpreted. I am a woman working towards a doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology. I have primarily worked clinically with marginalised individuals who have experienced death in horrific ways that were difficult to share and challenging to process. These individuals often chose to share their grief with me using music and art.

I identify as an ethnic minority and I believe that my culture largely shapes my understanding of death and loss. I was exposed primarily to the customs and beliefs of a war-torn country and my immediate family was greatly affected by traumatic loss. Such experiences were normalised in my family of origin.

Additionally, I experienced a significant loss while writing this dissertation, which inherently affected my ability to separate my own grief from that of others whom I was writing about. In order to acknowledge my personal biases, I kept a research journal and found that I needed to take a break from the project. I struggled to listen to the interview transcripts while I was working through my own loss. I felt like I was caught in a strange place at the time. I came to understand that loss was undoubtedly a painful experience and that it is likely experienced differently by everyone. Despite this, I encouraged myself to continue to write this research project so that I could give a voice to the bereaved participants who had given me a window into their private worlds and granted me the privilege to learn about their grief.

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CHAPTER 2: Study 1

Layers of Grief Talk: *So Nothing's Off the Table?*

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2.1 Abstract

A large number of post-secondary students will experience the death of a close family member or friend that will impact their academic performance, social functioning, and psychological well-being. Using discourse analysis to analyse photo-production interviews with 10 bereaved women enrolled at a University in Western Canada, the focus of this study was on four discursive strategies or layers that the women used to give an account of their loss: (a) distancing through euphemism, (b) seeking permission to fully grieve, (c) defining normalcy personally and in grief, and (d) struggling to be authentic. We found that the discursive strategies used by the women allowed them to shift their talk from sanitised to more personal during the course of the research interview in an effort to create, through dialogue with others, a socially constructed sense of a normal response to loss.

Keywords: Grief, Bereavement, Qualitative Research, Discourse Analysis, College Students

2.2 Layers of Grief Talk: *So Nothing's Off the Table?*

2.2.1 General Introduction

Many post-secondary students will experience the death of a close family member or friend. In the United States, the number of post-secondary students who reported to be in their first year of bereavement has most often been cited as between 25 and 30 percent (Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008). The rate of reported bereaved students increased to 39 to 50 percent (Balk et al., 2010; Neimeyer et al., 2008) when researchers accounted for those in the first 24 months of bereavement. More recently, however, Cox and colleagues (2015) found a rise in the number of bereaved students on U.S. campuses when they surveyed students across four years of post-secondary enrolment. The researchers found that 60 percent of senior students had lost at least one family member or friend since the end of their first year in college and one in four of those bereaved students reported multiple losses (Cox, Dean, & Kowalski, 2015). Neimeyer and colleagues (2008) have appropriately termed this pattern of bereavement a "silent epidemic" that has spread across the college campus and resulted in negative academic, social, and psychological outcomes for students across the United States.

2.2.1.1 Impact of loss on development and self-identify. Death of loved ones is a naturally occurring event in our lives, and research conducted by Bonanno (2004) has indicated that most individuals are resilient in the face of loss. Although the rate of bereaved college students suggests that death of a loved one among this population is common, it is likely that the experience of this population is rather unique. The loss experienced by a college student occurs at a critical time in their development of self-identity (Balk, 2001; Hogan & DeSantis, 1996; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Indeed, making meaning of such tragedies, by integrating death

into their evolving life story, is particularly challenging for this population, with violent deaths cited among the most difficult (Neimeyer et al., 2008). What further complicates matters is that a lack of emotional support has been found to increase the risk of many mental health problems, including complicated grief (Lobb et al., 2010). Researchers have reported that female students' mental health is more likely to be negatively affected by the loss of a close relationship when compared to their male counterparts (Walker, Hathcoat & Noppe, 2012). For females, these negative effects included a loss of motivation in academic pursuits (Walker et al., 2012). A lack of perceived emotional support is particularly salient among post-secondary students who believe that no one understands them and no one is listening (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

2.2.1.2 Lack of peer support. Researchers have identified factors that contribute to inadequate access to emotional support. Scholars have noted that while students attend university, the geographic distance to their home community prohibits access to their traditional support systems (Fajgenbaum, Chesson, Lanzi, 2012; Schnider, Elhai, & Gray, 2007). Although other researchers have found that students have used online social networking sites to overcome geographic distance when a loved one dies (Carroll & Landry, 2010), evidence of the benefit to such sites is mixed. A lack of support from peers during bereavement (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012) leaves many students feeling disconnected and isolated from their non-grieving peers (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015; Shultz, 2007).

In addition to the geographic distance barriers, researchers have found negative outcomes from peer support including changes to the peer relationship that have been attributed to a lack of knowledge of grief, a lack of skill in dealing with the bereaved (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010), and a lack of empathy (Balk, 1997). Indeed, in one online survey conducted by Tedrick Parikh and

Servaty-Seib (2013), non-bereaved peers perceived risks to providing peer support, such as expending time and energy, and general feelings of discomfort discussing the death. Similarly, Balk (1997) wrote that "the common experience of many bereaved students is that their peers become overwhelmed with anxiety when grief enters a room and afraid of the person who is bereaved (p. 208)." Naturally, such attitudes towards bereaved individuals have had negative emotional consequences on the bereaved student. In a recent publication, Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) compiled 33 stories written by bereaved university students and recent graduates. They found that, among the writers, each described a feeling of loneliness when others did not understand or relate to their experience. They noted that their loneliness was likely perpetuated by a reluctance to express their grief to their peers so as to avoid being a burden to others (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). In fact, in an earlier study conducted by Balk (1997), he found that 7.2 percent of bereaved students had not talked to anyone about the death they experienced.

The lack of knowledge about bereavement and the lack of emotional support provided to bereaved post-secondary students has sparked efforts for the development of formal support groups and campus interventions (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). Although some researchers have found that students benefit from weekly bereavement group sessions (Battle, Greer, Ortiz, Hernandez, & Todd, 2013), a U.S. national survey of college counselling centers reported that only 11 percent of eligible students will use formal counselling services (Gallagher, 2014). In fact, in a study by Cox and colleagues (2015) that specifically examined the frequency with which bereaved students used counselling services, including those services outside of campus, the researchers found that 84.6 percent never visited a counsellor. The majority of bereaved students (52.1%) faced barriers to seeking and utilizing counselling services including

a lack of knowledge on the availability of, and access to, such services, a lack of free time, and the stigma associated with counselling (Cox et al., 2015).

Additional efforts have been made to establish peer-led support groups on campus. Nationwide initiatives in the U.S., such as Actively Moving Forward (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012), maintain that grieving students are in need of emotional support from their peers as opposed to traditional formal support from counsellors. Although such peer-led groups appear beneficial, little is known about the nature of the discourse that occurs between peers or that which occurs in formal counselling sessions.

2.2.2 Purpose and Rationale

Most attempts to understand post-secondary students' experience of grief have focused on verbal reports. One area that has been largely omitted from research has been other representations of grief, such as in photographs. Today, many young adults use photographs to communicate with their social networks on popular media. Given that loss is a difficult topic to discuss, we assumed that introducing photographs to the research interview would act as a buffer between participant and interviewer, making the interview process less threatening and more informative of their loss experience. We wondered what would happen if we asked a group of female university students to participate in a photo-production interview and how would they talk about their loss?

The purpose of this study was to understand how female university students discursively constructed the death of a family member or friend in their lives and the function of the discursive strategies they used when they integrated their photographs in the research interview. For the purposes of this study, we focused exclusively on the dialogue that was produced in the interview and not on the photographs. We defined bereavement as a loss through death and used

this term to describe participants' account of mourning (i.e., the public actions of individuals that are observable following a loss) and grieving (i.e., the personal and private reactions of individuals following a loss; Doka & Martin, 2010).

Researchers have argued that we have a limited understanding of bereaved post-secondary students (Balk, 1997; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010), and, although there has been increased research attention to this population in recent years, there is a need for further exploration. To date, no studies have examined in depth the function of the language university students use to give an account of their loss. In fact, most of the existing literature on bereaved students is quantitative in nature. Of the few bereavement studies that have used a qualitative methodology, only a select few researchers have used discourse analysis, and only to study online social networking and bereavement (Paulus & Varga, 2015; Varga & Paulus, 2014). None have done so using a photo-production method. The lack of discourse analysis studies to examine bereavement is surprising, given that grief is a socially constructed phenomenon. Although there have been a number of efforts to make discussions about death mainstream (e.g., death cafés; Miles & Corr, 2015), there is no evidence to suggest that the student population is well represented in such efforts. Therefore, we argue that we must examine the talk that *is* happening amongst post-secondary students in order to bring change to the taboo regarding death talk.

In addition, most researchers who have examined the bereaved college population have focused exclusively on college students in the United States. Although we share similar western-world practices, very little is written about bereaved Canadian university students. We examined bereaved students enrolled at a large university in Western Canada and we chose to focus on bereaved women in an attempt to gage the discrepancy between the social assumptions about this

population (i.e., that they are more likely to be intuitive grievers, allowing them to more naturally confide in others) and their actual social practice in this particular context (i.e., a photo-production interview).

2.2.3 Epistemology and Methodology

We approached this study from a constructionist epistemology, and thus, assumed that meaning is socially manufactured. According to the social constructionist perspective, there is no truly objective existence beyond that which we have created (Crotty, 1998). We made the following assumptions about our data that were grounded in this epistemology: (1) our understanding of grief is a product of our culture and history situated in time; (2) knowledge and meaning are constructed from social interactions (such as talk) and from human interactions with objects in their worlds. The institutions in which we are rooted, therefore, largely shape our knowledge of grief; and (3) constructions of the world will, then, foster some social actions while omitting others including those social actions associated with grief (Burr, 2003; Crotty, 1998).

Discourse analysis suited our epistemological assumptions and, as a methodology, addressed the purpose of the present study (Wetherell, 2007). Discourse analysis examines the function of language, or what people do with their talk (Wood & Kroger, 2000). We were most interested in the discursive strategies that female university students used to navigate their account of loss. In order for us to understand the process involved in the account, we needed to not only identify the discursive resources (i.e., broad meaning systems) available to the participants and how they were used in talk, but also to explore the conflicts that occurred in the process (Potter, 1996; Wetherell & Edley, 2014). It was reasonable then to focus our analysis

primarily on how participants discursively constructed the death experience in the interview (Wood & Kroger, 2000).

2.3 Method

The behavioural research ethics board of a Western Canadian University reviewed and approved the study. The nature and process of the study was explained to all participants and informed consent was obtained both verbally and in writing. In order to protect the identity of the participants and the integrity of deceased loved ones, the transcripts were de-identified and pseudonyms used.

2.3.1 Participants

Participants of the present study were interviewed as a part of a broad research project. The research project recruited students who were enrolled in a second-year Psychology of Death and Dying course taught by the second author. In a brief presentation to the class, the first author informed students of the research project, the process and commitment involved to participate, and the compensation they were to receive for their participation. Students were given the opportunity to substitute their participation in the study for credit towards a course assignment. Students received full credit towards the assignment upon completion of a brief written reflection on their experience as a research participant. The second author was not involved in the research interviews, did not review interview materials, and did not contact participants for research purposes, while teaching the course in order to mitigate dual-roles and decrease any inherent biases.

The first author communicated with all participants via e-mail following the in-class presentation. Thirty-one students responded to the research project and participated in an interview. Of these students, 10 were included in the present study who met the following

criteria: (1) the participant self-identified as a female; (2) the participant talked about a death-related loss; (3) the focus of their account was on one significant person for the large majority of the interview; and (4) the participant self-reported that the death was life-changing.

The relatively low number of female participants who met the inclusion criteria was likely a factor of our recruitment process. Some participants were simply more genuinely engaged in the process and demonstrated an emotional investment in the lost relationship while other participants were less engaged. For example, several participants discussed the loss of a pet as their most meaningful loss, while others discussed the death of a celebrity. Although both the death of a pet and celebrity are worth exploration, they were not the focus of the present study and so these participants were excluded. We chose to include only those women who reported that the death was life-changing based on previous findings that suggested that closeness was significantly related to grief intensity, poor academic experiences, and increased mental health problems (Servaty-Seib & Pistole, 2007; Walker et al., 2012).

The age of the women ranged between 19 and 46 years, with 70% falling between 19 and 24. Although the age of the women varied greatly, we assumed, as with other discourse analysts, that the variability in age would make for a stronger analysis given more a more diverse data set (Wood & Kroger, 2010). Two women discussed the death of their father, two their best friend, two their romantic partner, and two women discussed the death of their grandfather. One woman discussed the death of her sister, and one woman discussed the death of her cousin. Each participant was verbally debriefed at the end of the interview and received a written debrief form with the contact information of local community support providers. One woman was contacted after the interview as it became apparent in the debriefing period that she was in need of more support. The subsequent communications with her were not recorded or included in the study.

2.3.2 Photo-production Interview

The women included in the study all participated in a photo-production interview[1]. Although interviews are commonly used with discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000), we assumed that simply asking participants to give an account of their grief would be challenging and laced with social and customary practices. Therefore, we asked participants to take 10 photographs that captured their loss before the interview to share with the interviewer. We asked participants to engage with objects (i.e., people, places, or items) in their lives with the assumption that the time spent capturing photographs before the interview would foster some awareness of, and meaningful dialogue on, their personal account of bereavement (Majumdar, 2011). Prior to the interview, each participant electronically sent her photographs to the interviewer, which were then uploaded on to a tablet. The photographs that the women captured were provided to them on the tablet in their interview, where they were asked to maintain control of the tablet and discuss each photograph in order of their preference. Following informed consent, each interview began with the prompt, "tell me about your first photograph."

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews ranged in length from 39 minutes to 1 hour and 40 minutes. The women were all given the opportunity to read their transcript and to make changes for member checking purposes. No participant made changes to their original transcript. Three of the women were interviewed in the fall of 2013 while the remainder of the women were interviewed the following year.

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[1] Currently, there are a number of terms that are used to describe photography in research: photo-elicitation (Collier, 1957; Harper, 2002), reflexive photography (Harrington & Lindy, 1999), photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1994), auto-driving (Heisley & Levy, 1991), participatory photo interview (Kolb, 2008) and photo-production (Reavey, 2011). The fundamental and theoretical assumptions of these methods vary considerably. Reavey (2011) quite clearly makes the distinction between photo-elicitation and photo-production, which we have adopted. Where photo-elicitation includes the use of existing photographs to elicit dialogue from participants, photo-production requires participants to produce or capture photographs on their own for the purposes of the research study (Reavey, 2011). This method is explored in detail in another study (Dadgostari & Chartier, 2018).

2.3.3 Analytic Procedure

There are many variations in the analytic procedures used by discourse analysts (McMullen, 2011). We analysed the data using procedures most closely associated with discourse analysis in social psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 2000) since we were most concerned with the dialogue that was produced during the interviews as they related to the psychological construct, grief. With each interview, we were actively engaged in the analytic process and the questions asked of the women changed as we shifted our focus from the experience of loss through death to what the women were *doing* with their talk as they discussed the death.

Each transcript was read several times while listening to the audio recordings. We kept hand written notes on any and all patterns observed in the transcripts before we focused more exclusively on the discursive strategies available in the talk. Each transcript was then uploaded to NVivo 10, a computer software program designed to organize qualitative data. Each transcript was re-read and categories were created using excerpts of discursive strategies in the transcripts. Each category was explored, organised, and defined. The components of each category were further refined (i.e., divided and collapsed) and the relation between the components analysed to formulate the results. We engaged in many discussions during the analytic process with each other. Detailed research memoranda were kept on our analysis that described how our analysis emerged and evolved over time.

2.4 Analysis

We focused on the discursive strategies that the bereaved women used when they talked about the death of a family member or friend during the research interview. The strategies that the women used in their talk were classified into four central categories: (a) distancing through

euphemism, (b) seeking permission to fully grieve, (c) defining normalcy personally and in grief, and (d) struggling to be authentic. The four categories, though explained separately, are connected to one another and are used to illustrate the layered process that the women used to discursively construct their death experience in interview. See table below summarizing the following findings.

Table 2.1

Study 1 Summary of Findings

Discursive Strategy	**Description**
Distancing through euphemism	Reliance on language, metaphors, similes, and expressions commonly used in grief including etiquette or politeness that contributed to a sanitised script. Positioned the self as the "good" and socially accepted participant. i. *The burden of self-revelation:* Resistance towards, and avoidance of, a more personal construction of the death experience. Seeking affirmation to deviate from the sanitised script.
Seeking permission to fully grieve	Testing the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable social dialogue in interview and questioning the validity of the analogies and of specific death-related customs.
Defining normalcy personally and in grief	Assuming the role of griever positions the self as abnormal in relation to peers.
Struggling to be authentic	Pushing social boundaries in talk and reconstructing the death experience as evidenced by the shifting of strategies initially used in interview. Positioning the self as increasingly vulnerable.

2.4.1 Distancing through Euphemism

When the bereaved women constructed their death experience, they relied on broad meaning systems commonly associated with death. Indeed, the women initially used euphemisms and common death metaphors to describe their experience during the interview. For example, the women described the deceased as gone:

> Andy: I don't know he like, I guess, he was sick for a really long time and *[short pause]* then one day he just *[short pause]* the nurses told me he was gone.

They described the deceased as passed:

> Bridgette: It was taken on my grad day and one year before my grad day the exact same date my gran—was the day my grandpa passed away.

And in some cases, the deceased had simply disappeared from their lives:

> Victoria: And, yeah he just poof *[emphasis]* gone. Just outta *[sic]* nowhere.

> Mila: Her mom didn't know how to tell me, I didn't know *[whispering]* for three days. So she kinda *[sic]* just disappeared.

The use of such euphemisms for death in the interview demonstrated the presence of a discursive etiquette. However, such provisional politeness during the interview (Wood & Kroger, 2006) acted, in some ways, as a barrier to examining unexplored feelings and thoughts.

The bereaved women used common death metaphors and similes such as the changing seasons, dead trees, cold temperature, and darkness, to describe their bereavement. The analogies used by the women appeared to be a strategy that allowed them to talk about something for which they may have had no other socially acceptable explanation (i.e., what others are willing to listen to) and for which they believed would help the interviewer understand their experience. In the following excerpt, Alice uses colour as a metaphor for her grief:

> Alice: it's almost like *[short pause]* before grief you're living, okay, in a *[short pause]* a colourful world but it's like very um, low *[emphasis]* saturation, kind of colourful. Like, it's colourful but it's, it's just kind of like lah *[sic]*. And then during grief, it's like depressing and hard and *[short pause]* miserable and kind of gloomy and dark but then after *[emphasis]* like when you *[short pause]* kind of come out of the deep dark, dark, dark place of grief *[short pause]* it's like everything becomes more vivid. And everything *[emphasis]* seems to be in technicolour and everything seems just so much *[short pause]* um, brighter.

Although Alice uses a common death metaphor as a strategy to construct her death experience, the metaphor is riddled with contradictions. At first, Alice demonstrates doubt in the metaphor (i.e., use of the terms "almost like") and she struggles to formulate the contrast between a

"colourful world" and "low saturation." Yet she upholds the metaphor to describe her bereavement experience. She suggests that there is an end to grief by contrasting a "gloomy and dark" period with a more "vivid" and "brighter" time. However, she hedges this claim when she states that you only "*kind of* come out of the deep dark, dark, dark place of grief." Alice uses the metaphor to tentatively begin a conversation about her bereavement.

In addition to the use of euphemisms and metaphors, the women assumed the existence of a global understanding of certain customs and grief processes. Such assumptions were marked by words like "obviously," "supposed to," and "every." In the following excerpt, Andy assumes the universality of flowers at funerals.

> Andy: And then, this one's kinda *[sic]* self-explanatory 'cuz *[sic]* there's always flowers and music at every single funeral. *[chuckles]* Every. *[chuckles]* Or at least every single one I've been to or *[short pause]* experienced on television or anything.

Andy confidently states that a photograph of flowers is "self-explanatory" and she later supports her assumption by stating that they are even on "television or anything," rather than discuss the personal meaning of the photograph with the interviewer. Similarly, Clara expects that the interviewer shares a mutual understanding of her grief when asked to describe her anger.

> Clara: Um. Well, anger towards, like, everything that happened. Um, *[short pause]* and uh, just like sadness over him, being so young and, uh, um, *[short pause]* yeah. Everything, just everything that goes along with that, like um […] pretty much everything that, uh, I *[emphasis]* felt and everybody else felt after *[emphasis]* he was gone, comes back up again.

Clara expected the interviewer to assume the meaning behind "everything that goes along with that", as she was reluctant to express it herself at that time in the interview.

The women relied on the discursive strategies of euphemisms, metaphors, and assumed a global understanding of the broad meaning systems as a way to make a very personal and idiosyncratic experience more easily discussed. They took the position of the "good" participant

and described their experience rather generally and in terms that were socially accepted and "normal." Indeed, the bereaved women initially delivered a very sanitised script in the interview. The sanitised script reflected the existing broad meaning systems of death talk. In relying on a sanitised script to construct their death experience, the bereaved women took a distancing position. That is, they had a global answer which they used to describe their loss with others (the sanitised script); they excused their lack of personal and meaningful exploration into their grief (e.g., Alice: "I assumed they wanted me to just move on and, and pretend I was okay and so I, I started to pretend I was."); and they did not explore their grief beyond general terms. Clara explains her reluctance to question and explore her grief in the interview:

> Clara: But it's kind of, it almost like, cheapens it in some ways? 'Cuz *[sic]* it's like, moving into like, a *[short pause]* a *[short pause]* formula almost for being able to work through grief. Um, *[short pause]* but, *[short pause]* um, I think even within knowing that there are certain ways that you can work through grief um, *[short pause]* it's *[short pause]* um, like, knowing that everybody moves through it differently, um, *[short pause]* is kind of *[short pause]* I don't know, is kind of um, a little overwhelming to think of, like, to think that um, there's never gonna *[sic]* be a step by step process to help somebody through what they're feeling and there's never gonna *[sic]* be, like, a set of diagnostic tools for which way you should dig out of your grief.

Clara felt "overwhelmed" by the idea that grief has no formula, that it is a personal experience unique to each individual. Such beliefs may explain her earlier reluctance to describe her anger over the death of her friend.

Socially constructing the loss experience using the sanitised script was well supported among the women. As Alice explains in the following excerpt, deviating from the sanitised script by expressing ideas beyond those commonly represented in our broad meaning systems were more likely to inconvenience others and, therefore, alienate Alice from her social world. By relying on a sanitised script with which to talk about their loss with others, the women were less

likely to be challenged by others about their grief and perhaps, more likely to be tolerated by their peers.

> Alice: Um, *[inhale]* you just feel kind of like *[short pause]* I just remember thinking like, I do not, I do not want to put any um—I don't want to ruin someone's day. I—like, that was a lot of how I felt. It was just like, I […] like it feels like you are an inconvenience, that your life is an inconvenience to those around you. You're very like, *[short pause]* presence is an inconvenience because you are so sad and you have this issue.

Alice explained that she was mindful of what she shared with others so as to be less vulnerable and more tolerated. She had learned that others did not tolerate negative emotions, such as sadness. Although Alice discussed using this strategy with her peers, the strategy transferred to the interview as Alice and the other women demonstrated their reluctance to share their negative emotions by relying on euphemisms, common death metaphors, and global meaning systems to talk about their loss. Similarly, Andy explained an overwhelming sadness when she thought about the death of her father. Although Andy acknowledged this sadness in the interview, she explained that she normally did so, privately.

> Andy: Like, *[pause]* when I bought my first car. Or when I win a scholarship or got accepted to university. Just *[short pause]* the kind of bigger events. *[exhale] [chuckle] [pause]* Just wish he'd been there to experience them but he hadn't so *[short pause]* makes me miss him and then that makes me sad *[chuckle]*.
>
> Interviewer: Mhm. Mhm. And how do you usually deal with that?
>
> Andy: *[short pause]* I cry in the shower *[chuckle] [exhale]*.
>
> Interviewer: In the shower?
>
> Andy: In the shower. Just a good place to cry *[chuckle]*.
>
> Interviewer: Mhm. Can you tell me about that? What makes it a good place to cry?
>
> Andy: I don't know it just seems to be the place I always cry *[laughs]*. I don't plan *[emphasis]* to cry in the shower, it just happens. 'Cuz *[sic]*—probably 'cuz *[sic]* no one's there and the water just kind of wipes the tears away.

Interviewer: Mhm.

Andy: 'Cuz *[sic]* it's easier to cry by yourself then it is to cry with other people.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about that?

Andy: *[long pause]* I dunno *[sic]*, I guess just other people don't really understand why *[short pause]* you're crying. *[inaudible]* so, it's—you then have to explain why you're crying and you cry more and *[chuckles]* you don't really want to be crying but you are crying and then you're *[short pause]* just having to talk about it and it, it makes it worse and *[chuckles]*.

Andy explained that sharing her grief with her peers felt "worse" and she taught herself to experience such negative emotions in solitude. However, such strategies to meet the expectations of others were problematic. For example, Alice explained the inherent dilemma in adhering to public expectations when grieving.

Alice: And I, I don't think we realize that those expectations are completely uh, *[short pause]* like they're—they're kind of harmful like to the process 'cuz *[sic]* you, *[short pause]* you *[short pause]* are basically telling yourself that you aren't allowed to be sad and that you can't face what's happening to you. You can't admit *[emphasis]* what's happening to you, you just avoid it, because you wanna *[sic]* just keep going. You don't wanna *[sic] [short pause]* I don't know I just […]

Alice recognized the problem with a strategy that was used only to foster acceptance by others to meet a public expectation, during the interview, as she explained that it was harmful to her grief.

2.4.1.1 The burden of self-revelation. During the interview, the women were asked questions about the responses that they provided. The questions, intended to better understand their responses, were initially met with resistance and avoidance. That is, as the interviewer challenged the sanitised script which the women initially provided, by asking them to speak to their personal experience, the women were vague, hedged their comments, and at times avoided the topic. Although such strategies interfered at times with the discursive flow, they ultimately allowed the women to begin the conversation. For example, the women used uncertainty terms such as "I don't know":

> Nina: So, yeah, you tend to live in the past and you feel like *[long pause]* it— *[long pause] [quieter]* I dunno *[sic]*.
>
> Talia: I can't even believe that we still *[extension]*– or that we all lived there. Bizarre *[whispered]*. *[inhale]* Um *[extension] [long pause]* yeah I don't know.

The women also used the terms, "I guess":

> Victoria: "So I guess that's a good thing but *[short pause]* I dunno *[sic]*."

And they questioned the adequacy of their response, as they looked toward the interviewer for affirmation in response to prompts for a more personal construction of their death experience:

> Alice: nobody else around me was feeling what I was feeling so, I was able to kind of pretend I wasn't feeling what I was feeling, right. I don't know *[short pause]* if that makes sense.
>
> Mila: So I was upset. I was really *[emphasis]* upset. I think I was *[inhale] [sniffle]*— I don't know if I was more upset at the fact that she was gone *[emphasis]* but how she *[short pause]* left, if that makes sense.
>
> Bridgette: So it was, it was just like a nice memory *[long pause]* I'm not sure if I answered your question or not.

Similarly, when asked about the death notification of her partner, Thea is at a loss for words.

> Interviewer: What was that moment like for you, when they came and rang the door?
>
> Thea: *[quietly]* Um, *[extension] [short pause]* I don't know how to describe it.

Later in the interview, Thea attempts to describe her experience but hesitates and retracts her response:

> Thea: "And so pain and hurt, *[short pause]* I dunno *[sic]* those words don't even start to *[short pause]* describe *[short pause]* emotions and feelings *[short pause]* that I went through *[softly]* Yeah. I don't really know how to put it into words.

Similarly, both Bridgette and Mila state that they don't know how to answer a general follow-up question (e.g., tell me more about that). For example,

> Bridgette: *[long pause]* I'm not sure how *[laughs]*. I'm not sure what you're asking.

Mila: Um, *[short pause]* yeah, I would say it's very different. It's—it's *[short pause] [quieter]* I don't know how to answer that question *[chuckle]* um.

When the women were asked to talk about their personal experience and to deviate from the sanitised script, they struggled to formulate a response. Terms such as "I don't know," "I guess," "if that makes sense," might have been used to prevent the undermining of their response by the interviewer, a strategy often referred to as stake inoculation in discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2011). In this case, the force of their response was weakened when they deviated from the sanitised script.

Deviating from the sanitised script was uncomfortable for the women and speaking to their personal experience treaded on unfamiliar ground. The women used strategies to move on from, divert, and in some cases completely ignore the interviewer's perceivably intrusive questions. For example, when asked about the death of her best friend, Mila attempted to formulate a response but eventually gave up and asked to move on to another topic.

Interviewer: And how does that make you feel?

Mila: *[short pause]* That's hard. *[long pause] [sniffle] [long pause] [inhale] [exhale] [sniffle] [rustling noise] [sniffle] [long pause] [sniffle] [long pause] [sniffle]*. It's like, knowing that you'll not f—you'll never find that connection with somebody again *[long pause] [whispering]* I don't know. *[sniffle] [long pause] [sniffle] [very long pause] [sniffle]* I did not expect this to be this hard *[laughs] [sniffle]*. Can we move on?

Laughter was also used by the women as a strategy to "politely" move on from the discussion. For example, Bridgette: *"[quietly]* Can we move on? *[laughs]*." And, Thea: "*[chuckling]* Are we done with this?" The laughter, however, was often incongruous with the topic of discussion. For example, after speaking about the death of her sister, Nina chuckles and moves on.

Interviewer: That sounds really painful.

Nina: *[exhale] [chuckling]* Mm. *[short pause]* Well, *[short pause] [inhale] [rustling noise]* Okay, last two *[chuckle]*. Okay, ninth photo.

As discussed earlier and illustrated by both Alice and Andy, the women modified the language they used to talk about their grief in public, including in the context of the research interview. For example, Nina began to question her ability to talk about the death of her sister in the interview. Nina: "Um, I don't know, I—I used to think that I *[short pause]* that I can actually openly talk to people about this now." Nina alluded to the idea that, in the past, she talked about the death of her sister in a somewhat prescriptive way. By giving others a general explanation about her sister's death, she rarely acknowledged her own feelings and attitudes towards the event. Interestingly, Mae makes a realization that Nina did not.

Interviewer: What's kinda *[sic]* happening for you talking about this with me right now?

Mae: *[short pause] [exhale]* well, makes me feel a lot more sad trying to say it than thinking about it.

Interviewer: Mhm.

Mae: Feels different *[long pause]* Usu—I usually don't cry that much either. But I guess I'm just usually more used to it.

Interviewer: Mhm.

Mae: I guess, usually nobody asks me about it either.

Although the women were initially resistant and used a number of strategies such as reservation, hedging, and diversion, they still attempted to respond to the presumably challenging interview questions. For example, in the following conversation, Nina responded to the question about when she came to the "reality" of her sister's death.

Interviewer: What was that realization like for you?

Nina: *[long pause]* It was *[pause]* I dunno, 'cuz um, you always have this feeling that bad things does *[sic]* not happen to you. Like, it just ha—it happens to other

> people, it happens in the movies, it happens to anybody—it can never happen to you. When I realized that *[short pause]* it's true *[emphasis] [short pause]* you realize how *[pause]*—I dunno *[sic]* how *[short pause]*—you see life differently. Like, you see how fragile it is that it can change at any moment now *[short pause]*—it was, it was *[pause]* surreal I guess, like *[pause]* you don't get used to that. I-I-I dunno *[sic]* it's *[pause]* it's just hard to *[long pause]*. I don't know *[long pause] [exhale] [chuckles]* Yeah, sorry.

In her response, Nina uses "I don't know" and "I guess" to hedge her response. As Nina is asked to dig deeper into her experience, she is reluctant and apologizes to the interviewer. It appears that Nina's claims, presented tentatively, were redressed to be polite (Wood & Kroger, 2011), a strategy used by the women in their discomfort.

And Mila does the same when asked to describe her state in the interview.

> Interviewer: What's going on for you right now?
>
> Mila: *[short pause] [crying]* It's so hard to talk about her *[pause] [sob] [crying]* I always get like this when I mention her and I'm sorry *[exhale]* It's hard *[…]* Holy – *[chuckle] [sniffle]* I came in here thinking I wasn't gonna *[sic]* cry *[chuckle] [exhale]*. But, *[long pause] [whispers]* I don't know *[sniffle] [long pause] [sniffle] [very long pause] [sniffle]* I did not expect this to be this hard *[laughs] [sniffle]*. Can we move on?

The women struggled to discursively construct their death experience in the interview when they were asked to discuss issues that they had not discussed in the past. Thus, they relied on a sanitised script that was general and impersonal.

2.4.2 Seeking Permission to Fully Grieve

As the bereaved women discursively constructed their death experience they tested the boundaries of what was and was not acceptable social dialogue in the interview. For example, Talia attempted to gauge her limit within the interview at the onset:

> Talia: So nothing's off the table? Like I can say *[inhale] [short pause]* anything about *[short pause]*
>
> Interviewer: Anything.

> Talia: Anything about why I *[short pause]* why [the photograph] made me think of it.

By seeking permission from the interviewer, Talia acted socially responsible. As noted earlier, the way in which the bereaved women discursively constructed their death experience was to provide a scripted version of their experience, free from their personal and private thoughts and emotions. And ultimately, when challenged to explore a more personal discourse, the women were resistant and uncomfortable. At the same time that the women appeared resistant to a more personal discourse, they questioned the authenticity of the sanitised script (i.e., broad meaning systems) which they had initially used to discursively construct their loss. As Nina demonstrates below, the women were faced with this dilemma in the midst of the interview. Nina explained that she had felt comfortable talking to others, including strangers, about the death of her sister until she discussed her loss in the interview.

> Nina: Um, *[long pause]* it's because I actually thought before that I moved on since, as I said, like, I'm very comfortable talking about this to people now, like, I wouldn't even mind telling it to strangers. But then, as *[extension]* I'm doing this right now that I'm actually digging deep into what I actually felt and what actually happened, it made me realize that *[pause]* you can—like, it's almost impossible to move on. 'Cuz *[sic]* once you go back or once you started remembering what you felt that day or what—what you felt, like, when that happened, you'll always go back to that feeling. So, you haven't really moved on. Since, *[pause]* you can still feel it. You still feel what you felt that day. And I don't think that's moving on if you still feel that way. So yeah, I feel like I—I would never move on. *[pause] [quieter]* Yeah.

Nina was faced with a dilemma when she realised that she was no longer constructing her death experience from a sanitised script. Rather, Nina's reconstructed discourse was far more complicated and intimate as she dug "deep" into what she felt and what "actually" happened. In this case, Nina's realisation suggested that she was ready to move away from the sanitised discourse towards a more "private" one with the interviewer.

As the bereaved women began to construct a more personal discourse, they began to question the validity of the analogies and of specific death-related customs. For example, although Alice originally used coloured flowers to describe a vibrant life after grief, she later questioned the significance of flowers given to the bereaved.

> Alice: Like, and I just had very little patience for a lot of things like that. And people—it's like, I dunno *[sic]*, and I feel like people use flowers as like this *[high voice]* oh, I'm such a nice person, I'm gonna *[sic]* send them flowers and I show my support. And it's like that's not support, that's a flower. It's gonna *[sic]* die in a week. Like, if you really want to be there for me, like offer to like, come and help me. Offer to take me for a walk. Offer to come and just sit with me. Offer to take me for coffee. Like that is what I need. I don't need a flower. Like, and that's kind of, I dunno *[sic]*, I just realized so—now I (non-fluent) like, I dunno.

2.4.3 Defining Normalcy: Personally and in Grief

As noted above, Alice likely used her discomfort with traditional and customary grief practices as a strategy to showcase her overall defiance towards a sanitised script, which ultimately allowed her to construct a rather private one. However, such defiance could jeopardize their social positions. That is, as the women questioned the nature of a sanitised script, they risked positioning themselves as different. Indeed, the women consistently referred to themselves and their experiences as "weird," "strange," "crazy," and "abnormal", providing a hedged "private" and unexplored discourse.

> Interviewer: …these [short pause]—this feeling of sadness um, you know that you mentioned that you'll, you'll have a good cry in the shower. How else will you kind of deal with those feelings?
>
> Andy: *[long pause]* I *[short pause]* don't really deal with them. Just kinda *[sic]* have them and then move on *[chuckles]*.
>
> Interviewer: Mhm.
>
> Andy: Push them back. *[short pause]* Eventually they'll come out as a cry in the shower *[laughs]*.

> Interviewer: Mhm.
>
> Andy: Guess *[inaudible]* I just kind of suppress them and especially if I'm in a public place or around friends or anything.
>
> Interviewer: Because what would happen if you were to let those emotions come out in a public place or in front of friends?
>
> Andy: [short pause] They'd—everyone would probably look at me weird. They'd be like why are you crying or *[chuckle] [exhale]* why are you sad all of a sudden and *[pause]* they have before *[chuckles]*.

Andy demonstrated that the potential to position oneself as "weird" or "different" as a result of constructing one's death experience more personally likely maintained the sanitised script with others. Similarly, Alice explained that constructing her loss on her own terms made her a "different" person.

> Alice: And so, and now I'm kind of more in like pursuit of, of my own dreams and my own goals and my own visions but it, it's like I'm a different person. And it's weird. Like, *[short pause]* I like this life more because I feel, I feel much more myself and I feel much more alive and much more *[short pause]* um, real *[emphasis]*.

And in some cases, constructing a private discourse was a vulnerable position and, therefore, "silly" or "stupid." For example,

> Mila: "She [the deceased] uh, *[short pause] [exhale]* it sounds silly but she like blossomed like that, like everybody around her felt happier when she was around, d'you *[sic]* know what I mean?"

Mila used the strategy of discrediting her response with the term "silly" so that presumably, she was not vulnerable to criticism by the interviewer as she went out on a limb to construct a rather private discourse. Similarly, Victoria described herself as "stupid,"

> Victoria: Like, um, *[chuckle]* it's kinda *[sic]* stupid but one time I got shingles and I couldn't go out to this big dance that she wanted to go to. And I always felt bad for not going to this dance 'cuz *[sic]* she just loved it.

Indeed, the sanitised script was a strategy to maintain their normalcy. That is, if the women discursively constructed their loss using socially acceptable descriptions, then they positioned themselves as socially acceptable individuals. Mae described her reluctance to be different and explained that she used such strategies to avoid such a position.

> Mae: Um, well, in my head it's more like a picture of just like an emotionless face because you're not really *[short pause]* showing anyone how you're feeling or what you're thinking or—you just being normal or acting *[emphasis]* normal, looking normal. *[pause]* And that's *[short pause]* that's kinda *[sic]* more like me I'd think. I mean, I can't speak for anybody else but, I know I try to *[short pause]* act normal and look normal when I don't feel that way.
>
> Interviewer: What do you think that's about?
>
> Mae: *[long pause]* I don't know. I guess, *[sniffle]* I just don't like to be different. *[sniffle] [short pause]* Sometimes, just seems easier to deal with it yourself. To let others in. 'Cuz *[sic]* sometimes they don't understand *[short pause]* the way you're thinking *[sniffle]*.

The bereaved women faced a challenging dilemma that forced them into an undesirable position: knowing that the sanitised script did not fully capture their death experience while the personal or "private" discourse positioned them as different from others.

2.4.4 Struggling to be Authentic

Although the bereaved women allowed themselves to deviate from the sanitised script during the research interview, they struggled to be authentic. At times in interview, the women pushed social boundaries in their talk. When challenged, they reconstructed their death experience. They moved away from general terms, such as "everyone" when describing their experience, to personal pronouns, such as "I." For example, Andy takes a long pause when asked to construct her experience in the moment.

> Interviewer: Mhm. What's going on for you right now talking to me?

> Andy: *[long pause]* I dunno *[sic]*, I guess I haven't really talked about it in a long time. Like actually, talked about *[short pause]* what happened and *[pause]* like when I was little I went to a counsellor but that was just for like a couple years and […]

Although Andy explained that the interview was not the first time she had talked about her father's death, the strategies that she used suggested that she had not talked about her loss beyond a sanitised script in a long time. Similarly, although Nina had mentioned earlier that she had no difficulty speaking with strangers about the death of her sister, she retracts this statement when she later stated that she had not "really" talked about her loss.

> Interviewer: And I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about what it was like to just talk to me *[short pause]* today?
>
> Nina: *[exhale]* It was really *[chuckles]* hard. I didn't expect it to be *[chuckles]* this *[short pause]* hard, to be honest.
>
> Interviewer: And what do you think that that means?
>
> Nina: *[long pause]* It made me realize that I haven't fully *[pause]* um, I haven't fully explored what I felt that *[short pause]* day when it happened. When it all happened. Since I haven't really talked to anyone about it. And it made me realize how—that there are some things that even I *[emphasis]* don't *[short pause]* um, admit to myself that I had just *[short pause]* realized now. That I'm talking about it openly […]

Although the women discussed more emotionally laden topics, they often apologised for doing so. For example, both Talia and Bridgette apologise during the interview when they begin to cry, surprising themselves:

> Bridgette: *[pause] [inhale]* We've all been like really close. *[short pause] [swallows] [whispers]* Sorry. *[quiet laugh] [exhale] [short pause] [sniffles] [pause] [crying]* I didn't know I would cry during this.
>
> Talia: Um *[short pause]* sorry the tears might come.

Again, the bereaved women began the interviews with certain expectations and were prepared to discursively construct their death experience in a socially acceptable manner. And although the process of moving away from a social and publically distancing script

was challenging (as the women used a number of strategies to do so), the realisation that the strategies with which they had come into the interview had shifted as the interview progressed, was surprising. For example,

> Talia: At the time or now? [short pause] Now I'm feeling like I'm getting free psych a—*[laughs]* analysis *[laughs]*. Which is not what I thought this was going to be about *[laughs]* […] Um, *[extension] [short pause]* that being said *[emphasis]* I actually feel *[extension]* a little *[extension] [short pause]* happier lighter or *[extension] [short pause]* it *[short pause]* feels good to tell your story?
>
> Interviewer: Mhm.
>
> Talia: To somebody who- regardless of if they *[short pause]* don't wanna *[sic] [short pause]* have be here or not *[short pause]* or I mean your you're *[non-fluent]* listening right? It's like I have a captive audience and a locked door *(short pause)* and I can tell you my story *[laughing]*. So it feels good to have somebody listen.

As Talia described her impressions that the interviewer was indeed engaged in her discourse, she was able to ultimately tell her story.

2.5 Discussion

The focus of our analysis was on the way in which female university students discursively constructed the death of a family member or friend in their lives. Broadly, we found that the women had a tendency to use strategies that can be captured within four central layers of grief talk. Though presented categorically, we found that the layers were not mutually exclusive, but best understood as interwoven. The following is a brief overview and implication of each layer given the relevant research literature.

Initially, the bereaved women relied on broad and general meaning systems to construct their death experiences. Such meaning systems comprised of language, metaphors, similes, and expressions commonly associated with grief and bereavement. The bereaved women's reliance on these existing meaning systems to capture a personal experience illustrated that the language which individuals use to describe death is governed by social norms. The women used a polite

and sanitised talk to describe their loss. Though it is not surprising that language is governed by social norms, there is an implied assumption that there exists an acceptable, public, bereavement discourse. The finding that there exists an acceptable bereavement discourse is particularly important in the young adult population since research on non-bereaved peers outlined the risks associated with emotionally supporting a bereaved friend (Tedrick Parikh & Servaty-Seib, 2013). Given that non-bereaved peers reported general feelings of discomfort discussing the death, bereaved individuals have learned what to say and how to say it.

Although the bereaved women constructed their death experience from what we have termed a sanitised position (i.e., the taken-for-granted assumptions about how one must talk about their grief), they withstood subtle challenges to their constructions. That is, in an attempt to move away from the sanitised discourse, the interviewer asked participants to explain and gave participants space to explore their loss rather than maintain their usual response. Such attempts, however, were often met with reservation, hedging, and diversion strategies including incongruent laughter and abrupt changes to the topic of discussion. As a result, the findings of this study illuminated the tactics used by bereaved individuals to avoid such personal disclosure. As reported by Servaty-Seib and Fajenbaum (2015), young adults are reluctant to express their grief to their peers. The strategies identified here are similar in that they help facilitate such avoidance and disengagement from the peer group, which ultimately contributes to a lack of emotional support in this population. It should be noted that the methodology of the present study may have also contributed to the use of such interviewing tactics (e.g., moving on to the next photograph) and this is explored further in a second study (Dadgostari & Chartier, 2018).

The strategies used by the bereaved individuals to avoid personal disclosure were mediated by both the techniques of the interview method (e.g., using photographs as a buffer)

and the interviewing style. That is, the interviewer's style influenced the way in which the women engaged with and constructed their death experience throughout the interview. The change observed in the bereaved women's discourse (i.e., from sanitised to authentic talk) was facilitated by an interview style that did not impose the change but elicited it in an environment free of judgement. Again, as the interviewer asked increasingly intrusive questions, the women responded with reservation and resistance. In this study, the women demonstrated that changing the way in which they talk about their death experience in public fosters a new, yet vulnerable, position.

Ultimately, with the introduction of more personally meaningful interview questions (e.g., how did the death of [the deceased] make you feel?), the discourse of the bereaved women appeared to shift. That is, the sanitised script was no longer adequately capturing what would be a more personal response to a more personal question. Breaking down the sanitised script, however, resulted in a dilemma of personal position. As the women discursively constructed their experience from a place of personal meaning, they referred to themselves as abnormal or strange. What is meaningful in this result is that as the women embraced the position of bereaved and griever, they also subsumed a position of alienation.

Finally, as the talk of the women evolved during the course of the interview, they began to defy, and move away from social expectation to the social expectation of the interviewer. Their experience was reconstructed within the interview and the women explained that talking about their *personal* experience, as opposed to a sanitised script, was new. Given that we approached this study from a social constructionist perspective, it follows that such movement or meaning making by the women in interview was influenced by the social systems that they obtained from earlier interactions with others in conjunction with their interaction with the

interviewer. From a predominantly psychological perspective, however, meaning making is often considered to be a private process. According to Neimeyer and colleagues (2008), bereaved students engage in the meaning making process when they revise their sense of how the world works. That is, if the bereaved make sense of the tragedy, they exert increased control on their lives. The bereaved women in our study revised the way in which they discursively constructed the death experience in the interview. That is, they first assumed a sanitised script by making sense of how bereaved people are "supposed" to talk about death. However, as the interview fostered a more personal and meaningful discourse, the women reconstructed their death experience to include spontaneous topics of conversation.

One conclusion that the results of this study suggest is that grief talk in bereaved female university students may be best illustrated using themes that are interwoven. At one end of the spectrum of their death experience is the sanitised script or that which affords participants social approval. Such approval was learned from previous interactions with their social networks and is what was likely to protect them from emotional pain. We speculate that the sanitised script was, at some time, valuable and effective for these women, as it facilitated support and acceptance. Otherwise, the women likely risked positioning themselves as different from their peer group, leading to a sense of social alienation and isolation.

According to the literature, social support from peers is desirable during bereavement (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012), as many students report feeling disconnected and isolated from their non-grieving peers (Shultz, 2007; Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Such disconnection can contribute to poor psychological well-being and adjustment within this population that ultimately impacts their academic performance.

At the opposing end of the spectrum is a different script that moves away from the normative language used among their social networks towards a language that evolves through the influence of the research interview. It is important to note that we are not making the assumption here that there are non-public scripts occurring in the individual's thoughts or experiences. Rather, we conclude that the sanitised script is "put on" despite the greater complexity or personal identification with a private or more personal script. We posit that such movement was in an effort to create, through dialogue with others, a socially constructed sense of a normal response to loss.

With regards to development within an emerging adult population, a review of the literature suggests that the process in which emerging adults respond to the death of a loved one can be taxing on the achievement of normative developmental tasks (Balk, 1991; Balk & Corr, 2001; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Lohan & Murphy, 2002; Oltjenbruns, 2001;). That is, young adults are in the midst of constructing their self-identify and how they relate to others. (Lohan & Murphy, 2002). If they experience a loss during this process, they may struggle to understand loss as situated in their assumptions about who they are and how they relate to the world (Cohen, Mannarino, Greenberg & Shipley, 2002; Lohan & Murphy, 2002;). That is, young adults are required to cope behaviourally, cognitively, and affectively with bereavement at a time when such abilities are not yet fully developed (Balk, Zaengle & Corr, 2011; Fleming & Adolph, 1986; Lohan & Murphy, 2002).

A sense of affiliation and belonging are extremely important among young grievers (Balk *et al.*, 2011). Many young adults spend a significantly greater time with their peers than family. This is particularly heightened for individuals who are away from home for university. A loss during this time may impact their ability to fit in with their peer group, contributing further to a

sense of isolation, a lack of belonging, and increased psychological distress. Such assumptions are consistent with the discourse identified in this study.

There are contextual considerations to this study worth noting. First, the participants were recruited from a Psychology of Death and Dying class that is more likely to attract students who have experienced a loss or are interested in learning about loss. Such students were exposed in class to death and dying literature including theories of loss. Such immediate knowledge may have impacted the way in which they discussed their loss, as expected within a social constructionist framework and, as a result, these students may be different when compared to the student population not enrolled in this class. Additionally, the age range of students varied, with two students who were much older than the rest of the women. Their age may have implications for how these students relate to the assumptions we make about the young adult literature. Finally, while there is considerable literature on the experience of university students and grief, there is not much literature that specifically explores the discourse of bereaved women in a photo-production interview. Such limitations presented challenges in understanding the data with little direction from previous research.

Given the findings of this study, future studies that examine photo-production methods with bereaved individuals may be beneficial. For example, it will be informative to address whether the use of photographs created an even more intrusive atmosphere than interview questioning alone. The implications of this study also demonstrated the beneficial aspect of the method that is worth future exploration given the challenges associated with talking about death (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

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CHAPTER 3: Study 2

Using Photography to Talk About Death: A Photo-production Method

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3.1 Abstract

Many university students will become bereaved over the course of their post-secondary studies. Yet a lack of perceived emotional support is a salient factor among university students who often report that they are misunderstood and unheard by their peers. Given the popularity of photo-based social media, and the potential benefits of photo-methods, we examined how photo-production can be used to talk about lived experience with loss with 16 bereaved university students. Using thematic analysis, we found four themes that captured the experience of the bereaved students who participated in a photo-production interview: (a) agency (b) transformation, (c) exposing emotions, and (d) self-awareness. Together, our findings suggest that the photo-production method contributed to a therapy-like environment for the bereaved students who participated in this research study to explore their grief.

Keywords: Grief, Bereavement, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis, Photo-production, Photography, Death, Loss

3.2 Using Photography to Talk About Death: A Photo-production Method

3.2.1 General Introduction

Death is difficult to talk about and grief is often a challenging process to endure. Yet loss through death occurs for many university students (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008). In a recent study that surveyed university students in the United States, researchers found that 60 percent had lost at least one family member or friend over the course of their four-year academic enrolment (Cox, Dean, & Kowalski, 2015). Twenty-five percent of these students reported multiple losses (Cox et al., 2015). The vast number of students who experience death is a cause for concern since bereaved students may face many emotional challenges as a direct result of their loss. A lack of perceived emotional support is a salient factor among university students who often report that they are misunderstood and unheard (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Thus, death is a very real part of students' lives.

Because of the deaths in their lives, problems may arise for students. Researchers have identified that many students report feeling disconnected and isolated from their non-grieving peers (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015; Shultz, 2007), given the lack of adequate support they receive during the course of their bereavement (Fajgenbaum, Chesson & Lanzi, 2012). Many students will experience changes to their interpersonal relationships once bereaved. Researchers suggest that such changes to the peer relationship are attributable to a lack of knowledge of grief, a lack of skill in dealing with the bereaved (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010), and a lack of empathy (Balk, 1997) from non-bereaved peers. Tedrick Parikh and Servaty-Seib (2013) conducted an online survey and found that non-bereaved students identified expending time and energy, and general feelings of discomfort as "risks" when dealing with a bereaved friend. Balk (1997)

attributed the actions of non-bereaved peers to overwhelming anxiety that surfaced when dealing with a grieving peer. Students struggle with many issues following bereavement.

Beyond problems for bereaved students, the anxiety and fear of non-bereaved students, who serve as the source of support for those who are grieving, has negative consequences for the emotional well-being of bereaved students. Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) compiled 33 stories written by bereaved university students and recent graduates. The researchers found that each story expressed a sense of loneliness as the social support networks of bereaved students failed to understand their loss and relate to their experience. As a result, many students expressed their reluctance to share their grief with others (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

In light of this reluctance, the question arises as to why students would ever want to share their grief. Although grief has many emotional consequences in peer relationships, Balk (1997) found that many students report a positive experience talking about their loss. In a survey of 994 bereaved undergraduate students, the majority of students reported that talking about the death was very helpful (43.6%) or somewhat helpful (42.8%) to their grief. In the same study, Balk (1997) also reported that 7.2 percent of bereaved students had not talked to anyone about the death they experienced, leaving a significant number of students suffering alone. This finding then leads to strategies to facilitate the expression of students' grief.

3.2.2 Research Using Photographs

One possible avenue to the expression of grief in research interviews may be through the use of photographs. Photographs have been used in research for a variety of purposes by different disciplines. Although the use of photography in coping with a death-related loss is not a recent one (Summersgill, 2015), the limited availability of research literature on the topic suggests that this method may be largely underused and particularly so within psychology

(Heisley & Levy, 1991; Reavey, 2011). A review of the existing literature finds that photo-methods are used in sociology and anthropology (Harper, 2002), for the purposes of program evaluation (Wang & Burris 1994), as a qualitative research methodology (Carlsson, 2001; Phoenix, 2010), and to enhance the traditional research interview (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Harrison, 2002). Although the different terminology used to describe photo-methods are often used interchangeably, the theoretical assumptions of these methods vary greatly and are worth noting.

3.2.2.1 Photo-elicitation. Photo-elicitation, for example, describes the method in which photographs are used as an aid to foster dialogue within the traditional research interview (Collier, 1957). There appear to be several benefits to the use of photo-elicitation. Harper (2002) purported that, as humans, we respond to images differently because our physiological ability to process visual information is evolutionarily older than that of verbal information. As such, images elicit deeper and richer data than words alone (Harper, 2002; Heisley & Levy, 1991). In addition, photographs provide an "anchor" or common point of reference that is, in some ways, understood by both researcher and participant (Harper, 2002). Indeed, researchers suggest that photo-methods decrease the disparity between the researcher and the researched (Harper, 2002; Heisley & Levy, 1991; Wang & Burris, 1994), while increasing the agency of the participant who chooses the information that they share and how they share it (Reavey, 2011).

3.2.2.2 Auto-driving. Although photo-elicitation captures the method broadly, how the photographs are used and by whom the photographs are captured gives way to different terminology. The term 'autodriving,' for example, is used to describe the method of photographs in consumer research (Heisley & Levy, 1991). In auto-driving the researcher provides the photographs to participants, in an attempt to ease the stress associated with a research interview

(Heisley & Levy, 1991)[1]. Heisley and Levy (1991) also argue that the autodriving method is a form of member checking, which increases the credibility of the research results. In this way, photo-elicitation requires the researcher to be an active participant in the research interview.

Researcher-produced photographs, however, are not without limitations. When the researcher provides the photographs, they run the risk of using images that are not meaningful for the participants and, thus, do not add to the research interview (Harper, 2002).

3.2.2.3 Reflexive photography. In contrast to autodriving, reflexive photography (Harper, 1988) asks that the participant produce the photographs that are used in the photo-elicitation interview and, thus, accounts for such limitations. Harrington and Lindy (1999) used reflexive photography to understand students' impressions of the University of Southern Indiana. The researchers asked the students to document the time and date of the photograph as well as the theme or meaning derived from the photograph before attending the research interview (Harrington & Lindy, 1999). Although the authors did not comment on the photo-method process in their analysis, they developed themes to describe their research findings as relevant to the research question.

3.2.2.4 Photo-voice. Similar to reflexive photography, photo-voice (Wang & Burris, 1994) strives to give authority to the participant speaking to the topic of interest while shedding light on a very private social world. The two methods (reflexive photography and photo-voice), however, differ significantly in their fundamental assumptions. The photo-voice method is

[1] Heisley and Levy (1991) have discussed a hierarchy of abstraction as originally proposed by Collier and Collier (as cited in Heisley & Levy, 1991). According to this model, projective tests are ranked in their level of abstraction based on their use to elicit stories that reflect how people see and respond to life situations. Such projective tests include once commonly used psychological assessment tools such as the Rorschach test (considered an extreme abstraction), Thematic Apperception Test (semi-abstraction), defined line drawing (generalized representations), and finally, photographs. According to this model, photographs were considered to be the lowest level of abstraction as the method lacked "submerged psychological responses" and "free association" (Heisley & Levy, 1991, p. 260). However, they were also considered probes that are factual representations of the individual's life meant to trigger "emotional revelations (Heisley & Levy, 1991, p. 260)."

intended to be used with marginalised individuals in an attempt to understand their needs, enhance quality of life, and restore power to a traditionally oppressed population (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photo-voice is meant to invoke action and promote policy change within poorly served communities by actively engaging participants in both the analysis and the dissemination of the research findings (Wang, 1999).

Although at times markedly different, the methods reviewed above all share one common feature: they attempt to understand a social phenomenon in a way that is responsive to the needs of the population under study. Reavey (2011) quite clearly explains the nuances between photo-elicitation and photo-production. Where photo-elicitation broadly includes the use of existing photographs and new photographs to elicit dialogue from participants, photo-production requires participants to produce or capture photographs on their own *for the purpose* of the research study (Reavey, 2011). Similar to earlier researchers, Reavey (2011) highlights the way in which visual data engage the senses to explore "hard to reach" social problems.

3.2.3 Death and Dying Research Using Photographs

While the use of photography to deal with death has been around since Victorian times (Summersgill, 2015), there is limited research that has examined the use of photo-methods with bereaved individuals. Much of the available research literature explores the use of post-mortem photography to cope with perinatal loss (Blood & Cacciatore, 2014, Hochberg, 2011; Jones, 2002). Other researchers have explored the way in which reflecting and remembering using existing photographs can facilitate a continuing bonds relationship with the deceased (Riches & Dawson, 1998) that is ultimately therapeutic (Weiser, 2010). Although there appears to be a lack of research within this area, bereaved individuals have naturally gravitated towards the use of photography when faced with loss. An internet search engine reveals blog posts dedicated to the

use of photography to deal with grief (e.g., Photogrief; Journey Through Grief) and photography workshops for grieving parents and siblings (e.g., Beyond Goodbye, Carly Marie Project Heal).

Likewise, therapists have also incorporated visual methods in their treatment of bereaved clients. Although research exists to support the use of visual methods to communicate thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Case & Dalley, 2014) for various presenting problems (e.g., children and trauma), little research exists on the use of photography for bereaved adults. Thompson and Neimeyer (2014) address this paucity by providing a variety of clinical case examples detailing the use of expressive arts with bereaved populations. In one chapter, Renzenbrink (2014), for example, described how metaphors derived from photographs, quotes, and music can be used to make sense of loss. However, there remains a lack of empirical research dedicated to examining the use of visual research methods within the bereaved population.

3.2.4 Overview of the Current Study

Visual data have undoubtedly become the new form of social interaction among young adults. Indeed, young adults use photo applications on a daily basis (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook) to communicate with their peers (Pittman & Reich, 2016). The purpose of this study was to examine how photo-methods can be used to talk about the challenging topic of death with university students. That is, this study examined both *what* the photo-production method enables bereaved students to do in a research interview and *how* the method does this.

Although the literature has documented the use of the expressive arts with bereaved individuals in practice (Thomson & Neimeyer, 2014), to our knowledge, there does not appear to be any research exists that has examined the cross-section of grief and the expressive arts using a photo-production method. There is a need within the research literature to rigorously study the

possibilities of photo-production with the bereaved population given the benefits of photo-methods outlined above.

3.2.5 Epistemology and Methodology

We approached this study from a social constructionist epistemology. We assumed, therefore, that the patterns in our data were the product of a social process (Crotty, 1998). That is, we operated from the basic assumption that pre-existing social ideas account for the reality in the research data we examined (Burr, 2003). We assumed that the knowledge derived from the data was co-constructed in the social interaction between participant and interviewer. The results of this study were subject to our culture, institution, and time (Burr, 2003).

A thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006) suited our epistemological assumptions and research question: what does the photo-production method enable bereaved students to do in a research interview (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Often described as an "accessible" methodology, Braun and Clarke (2012; 2017) state that thematic analysis can allow for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within a data set at the interpretive (i.e., latent) level. According to the researchers, thematic analysis can be used to examine people's practices (Braun & Clarke, 2017). In the present study, thematic analysis was used to examine how bereaved individuals perform in a research interview using photo-production to elicit dialogue.

In providing a rich and complex account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), thematic analysis also largely aims to consider the reflexive nature of research (Braun & Clarke, 2017). As researchers, we assumed an active role in the research process. That is, we acknowledged that our pre-existing experiences influenced the data we collected and subsequently analysed.

Given the level of flexibility with a thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise the broad application of the methodology. Researchers can explore a detailed account of one particular aspect of their data based on a very specific research question. The methodology gives way to a deductive or theoretical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2014), which aligns well with our epistemological assumptions as we take what is known about grieving young adults' reluctance to engage in grief talk to formulate a general conclusion using a photo-production method.

3.3 Method

The behavioural research ethics board at a Canadian University granted ethical approval for the present study. Participants were informed of the nature and process of their participation and consent was obtained both verbally and in writing. Transcripts were de-identified and pseudonyms used in the dissemination of findings to protect the identify of participants and the integrity of deceased loved ones discussed in the study.

3.3.1 Participants

Participants were recruited from a second-year Psychology of Death and Dying course at a Western Canadian University as a part of a broad research project. The second author was the instructor of the course at the time. In order to mitigate dual-roles and decrease any inherent biases, he did not engage in the recruitment process, he was not involved in the data collection, he did not review interview materials, and he did not contact participants for research purposes, while teaching the course. Students enrolled in the course received a brief in-class presentation by the first author regarding the purpose, process, and compensation involved should they choose to participate in the research study. All subsequent communications with participants, with the exception of the research interview, were via email.

Thirty-one students participated in the research project and, of these, 16 student interviews were included in the analysis of the current study. Participants were included in data analysis if they met the following criteria: (1) the participant talked about a death-related loss; (2) the focus of their account was on significant persons for the large majority of the interview; and (3) the participant self-reported that the death was life-changing. There were several factors that likely contributed to the low number of participants from the research project who met the inclusion criteria for this data set. Although we provided the parameters of participating in our study to students, some chose to disregard instructions. For example, we asked participants to explore a death-related loss of a person; however, a number of participants chose to focus on non-death related loss (e.g., loss of employment or housing). Several participants discussed the loss of a pet as their most meaningful loss, while others discussed the death of a celebrity. Additionally, participants in the study were given the opportunity to substitute participation in this project for credit towards a research paper in their class as compensation for their time and effort. Such compensation was likely rather alluring as many students assumed that taking photographs and discussing death would be "easier" than writing a paper. Finally, we chose to include only those participants who reported that the death was life-changing since the existing literature suggested this factor was significantly related to grief intensity and increased mental health problems (Servaty-Seib & Pistole, 2007; Walker, Hathcoat, & Noppe, 2012).

Of the 16 students included in the current study, 3 students completed research interviews in 2013, while the remaining 13 students participated the following academic year. Three of the participants self-identified as male and the remaining participants as female. Age of participants ranged between 19 and 46 years, with the majority of participants (88%) between 19 and 23

years of age. Participants discussed the death of a cousin (1), parent (2), sister (2), romantic partner (2), grandparent (4), and best friend (4).

3.3.2 Photo-Production

During the brief in-class presentation, students were given both verbal and written step-by-step instructions (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to reflect on the impact that death had on their current life experience. They were asked to take 10 photographs, using a digital camera. The number of photographs was chosen based on previous research findings that suggested interview productivity significantly decreased with greater than 10 photographs (Heisley & Levy, 1991). Participants were specifically instructed not to use existing photographs (e.g., family portraits, baby photos), internet photographs (e.g., images from internet search engines), or photographs of faces. The intention of such parameters was to encourage participants to actively engage in the process (as opposed to passively participate by relying on old photographs or memories). Since photo-production requires participants to produce or capture photographs on their own for the purposes of the research study (Reavey, 2011), all photographs were original work taken for the research project. We asked participants to engage with objects in their lives with the assumption that the time spent capturing photographs before the interview would help them speak to their experience (Majumdar, 2011).

Prior to the research interview, participants were asked to digitally upload their photographs and provide the researcher with a copy of each photograph that they wished to include in the study. They were also instructed to include a short title for each photograph. Photographs for each participant were then uploaded on to a tablet for use in the research interview.

3.3.3 Research Interview

Each interview began with a review of informed consent and the purpose of the research project. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions. They were informed of the unstructured nature of the interview, designed to understand their lived experience with loss. The photographs that the participants had sent were provided to them on a tablet. Participants were specifically instructed to maintain control of the tablet and discuss each photograph in order of their preference, at their own pace. At the outset, each participant was asked to tell the interviewer about their first photograph. The remainder of the interview questions were tailored to respond to the discourse provided by each individual participant.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The length of interviews ranged between 39 to 100 minutes. Participants were debriefed at the end of the interview and each participant received information regarding community support services. One woman was contacted after the interview as it became apparent in the debriefing period that she was in need of support. The subsequent communications with her were not recorded or included in the study. Six participants expressed their interest in receiving a copy of their transcript for member checking purposes; of those participants only two responded and neither made changes to their transcript.

3.3.4 Open-ended Questionnaire

Students who wished to receive credit towards a class assignment as compensation for their participation in the research project were asked to complete a brief open-ended questionnaire regarding their experience (see Appendix E). The purpose of the questionnaire was to better understand participants' reflective experience using photography in a research

interview. All 16 participants completed the questionnaire. Their responses were used in conjunction with the research interviews for the analysis of the current research study.

3.3.5 Analytic Procedure

There are many ways in which researchers have used thematic analysis in qualitative research. We used the six-step analytic procedure introduced by psychology researchers Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse our research data. It is important to note that, although the analytic procedure is presented as a step-by-step process, our analysis was dynamic and ongoing from the time of project construction to the dissemination of findings.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis begins with building familiarity with the data set. In the present study, all research interviews were transcribed and each transcript was read and re-read several times while listening to the audio recordings. We kept hand-written notes on initial codes featured in the data as well as detailed research memorandams. We engaged in many discussions during the analytic process with each other and, in addition, we discussed our initial ideas at a larger qualitative research team meeting held at the University. We then organised the codes into overarching themes using NVivo, a computer software program designed to help organise qualitative data. The initial themes were reviewed, defined, and named. Extracts were used to illustrate and provide support for the final themes identified in our analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; 2017; Clarke & Braun, 2013).

3.4 Analysis

The focus of this study was on *what* the photo-production method enabled bereaved participants to do in the research interview and *how* the method enabled such results. We identified four themes to capture the experience of bereaved students who participated in a photo-production interview: (a) agency, (b) transformation, (c) exposing emotions, and (d) self-

awareness. See the table below for a brief overview of the findings. How each theme was influenced by the method is discussed in the following analysis.

Table 3.1

Study 2 Summary of Findings

Theme	**Description**
Agency	The freedom and control to choose what to share and how to share that information in the interview.
Transformation	Building insight into the death experience within the research interview. i. *The metanarrative:* Information about the death experience not captured in the actual visual data to give the photograph context. ii. *Symbolic representation:* Symbolism, analogies, and metaphors used to express grief. iii. *Integration:* Connections built between photographs to create the metanarrative; connecting one photograph or topic to another later on in the research interview.
Exposing emotions	The movement in *and* out of emotional states within the research interview.
Self-awareness	A deep level of processing enabled by experiencing and re-experiencing the loss within the research context.

3.4.1 Agency

The photo-production method led to open-ended responding wherein the participants told a story in their own way. At the outset of the interview, the participant was asked a general question: to talk about their first photograph. This strategy enabled the participants to direct the conversation and set the pace of the interview. Nothing more was needed from the researcher, as all participants were sufficiently cued by the introductory statement. The following excerpt demonstrates that little effort on the part of the researcher was needed to learn about this student's lived experience with the death of her sister.

Interviewer (I): […] start by telling me about your first photograph.

> Respondent (R): Okay, so for my first photograph I choose this one […] I'll just give you a little background. I was *[extension]* 14, 13 when my older sister died in a car accident. We were on our way home and what happened was—I was asleep at the time and then apparently the people who was in the car with us told me that she protected me before the truck hit us. […] people told me that I was the one who was supposed to die that day but then it was because she did that to me, that's why, like, I'm here. So, I feel like my first photograph shows how I really felt that time […] the library—like there's always people in there, right? And then the photograph shows that […] even if this place is usually have like lots of people like crowded, like you still feel all alone because you feel like nobody really gets *[emphasis]* what you feel since first of all I was the first one who saw her. I was with her when she died and I kind of feel like it was my *[short pause]* fault, I guess that she died. So, yeah, I feel like I was all alone like, I couldn't really tell anybody I feel bad.

As demonstrated above, this participant decided what was important to share in the introduction to her loss, by outlining when and how her sister died. She then connects her story to the photograph to demonstrate how she is affected by the loss today.

Participants spoke at length about the photographs. Indeed, the narrative continually evolved with little probing and follow-up questions from the researcher, apart from acknowledgement and validation from common conversational cues (e.g., "mhm"). That is, the photographs often facilitated the talk. Which photographs to include and in what order the photographs were presented was at the complete discretion of the participant. Some participants indicated that the photographs were presented in an order. The following excerpts provide two explanations for the order in which the photographs were presented.

> R1: *[exhaling]* Hu-ah, well I, I put everything out kind of so that it went by story-wise and what not.
> I: Mhm.
> R1: And some of these—it's not in chronological order or anything like that. It was more in impact order and what not.

> I: Was there an order?
> R2: Yeah. Uh, actually, I just thought of this as—what I did with my assignment was […] it was like a story of what I felt.

In these two cases, both participants took control and explained that the photographs were purposefully presented as a "story" of their lived experience with death.

The method was, at its most fundamental level, participant-centered. That is, participants were given the freedom to choose which photographs were meaningful for the interview. By relying on the photographs to elicit the talk, the participants had the control to choose what they shared. As a result, the interview method gave power to the participant. The following feedback from three participants following the research interview demonstrates the influence that photo-production had on their perceptions of power, control, and freedom.

> R1: I enjoyed the picture taking the most because it allowed me to capture the moments in my life concerning death, in a more positive light. I had control of how the pictures looked and how they reminded me of the people and animals I miss.
>
> R2: It was interesting and tough to decide what to take a picture of and why exactly it would be relevant. I was excited to share my creative side in a different way with no rules. I liked that I could use my own prerogative and decide what pictures would get my point across the most.
>
> R3: I liked not really knowing what the purpose was and having an open mind that gave me the freedom to choose the photos that I wanted.

It appeared that allowing participants to choose what they shared and how they shared that information fostered a new-found agency. Movement between topics was, for the most part, directed entirely by the participant. A long pause between photographs often cued the participant to move on to the next photograph without interviewer interference. Some participants took it upon themselves to ask whether the interviewer had any further questions and in other such cases, the participant continued with their story and the interview continued moving forward.

In some cases, the method even allowed participants to defy study instructions by including photographs that were not taken for the purposes of the research project. In most of these cases, the participant included a photograph of their deceased loved one among other

photographs that they captured. Including a few such photographs did not particularly appear to hinder participants' ability to given an account of their loss. Few participants explicitly stated that they did not take the photograph for the assignment. For example,

> R: Alright. Okay this one I took is just, is just a picture of a thunderstorm that I'd taken last year I think?

For others, who did not explicitly state that the photograph was pre-existing, this was clear from the content of the photograph (e.g., father's casket, school photo of deceased sister).

> R: Yeah, so, that's my dad. Um, that was the day that he—so, uh, sorry—And So Lies My First Love. *[inhale]* And that was the day that we went to his viewing.

During the course of the interview, participants were also afforded the opportunity to speak to experiences that they were unable to capture in their photographs. Often, participants reported that the photographs were unable to capture their emotions, as in the following two excerpts:

> R1: I think it's kind of hard to capture the, like, the emotional part of it. Like, the craziness or the grief and the sadness in a picture without being some, like, crazy photography—photographer person.

> R2: I guess it was harder to capture the sadness and how long the sadness lasts in the photographs.

Although participants reported that emotions were not captured in their photographs, emotions surfaced in their talk during the course of our contact. Indeed, the photographs became a reminder of the emotion. Such emotional experiences will be discussed in detail below.

As one participant noted:

> R: Without me explaining a lot of these pictures, like, they don't really hold *[emphasis]* anything for a lot of people. Like, they wouldn't be like: oh, yeah, like that's what this picture's about.

We discovered that the photographs truly went hand-in-hand with the interview. That is, the participant brought the emotion alive, while the photograph simply elicited the emotion. Overall,

the photo-production method appeared to allow bereaved participants to tell their story *the way they wanted to tell it* with little interference from the interviewer's questions. They gained a sense of agency.

3.4.2 Transformation

Participants actively made meaning of their death experience within the interview while reflecting on their photographs. The more participants talked about a photograph, the more meaning the photograph was given. As one participant clearly stated,

> R: I learned that I am in a constant search for meaning.

For others, making meaning of their loss and participating in this process was redemptive:

> R: What I loved about this study is that I was taking the most painful experience of my life and creating something beautiful out of it. It was almost redemptive. It was as though I was transferring my ashes into beauty.

Such sense-making was a pivotal part of the interview and, upon reflection, participants reported that they built new understanding as a result of talking about their loss.

> R1: I think I almost learned that it's okay to make my loss a part of my present life. A big part of me thought that in order to move on I had to let go of the pain. However, as I was taking the photos and meditating on the loss experience and the resulting circumstances, I realized it's a part of who I am now. My loss is a part of what made me who I am today, and I can have grace with myself by accepting that it doesn't have to be let go of.

> R2: Through this study, I began to realise the major impact all of these deaths had on my life and how who I am today is because of their death.

> R3: [The interviewer] really prompted me to explore my themes/feelings of regret, remorse, and guilt far more in depth than I ever had before. Also, I learned more through our discussion about how speaking about death isn't just about recalling negative feelings about the past, but also includes expressing positivity and hope for the future. It also helped me realise how integrating thoughts about deceased loved ones in your present life helps shape form you as a person.

> R4: I liked that the study helped me understand why I am the way I am today. The experience of the study helped me reflect on my life and helped me understand what I value.

Notably, participants' reflections often alluded to learning how their death experience shaped the person they later became. We identified three ways in which the method enabled meaning making within the interview: the metanarrative, symbolic representation, and integration.

3.4.2.1 The metanarrative. We found that the photo-production method allowed participants to tell their story and share their grief. In many cases, the photograph enabled a metanarrative that was not necessarily captured in the actual visual data, yet gave the photograph context. For example, participants described how they learned of their loved one's death and how they died. They described the events leading up to, and at, the funeral. Participants described both memories of the deceased that occurred long before death and memories of events that happened right before the death. Finally, participants described the domino-effect (i.e., sequence of events) that occurred in their lives following the death.

3.4.2.2 Symbolic representation. By asking participants to capture photographs that represent their lived experience of death, we inadvertently encouraged them to use symbolism, analogies, and metaphors to express their grief. In the following excerpt, the student uses a metaphor to describe the after-effects of her loss and how religion played a part in her grief.

> R: This picture is of my bike and the other day my chain broke so I needed to put a new chain on it. And it's just the—kind of the idea that when something is like broken and beat up and it *[short pause]*—like something that hurts, I guess. Something in life that's not *[emphasis]* going right. There's always a way to fix it. And, well—in that situation the way to fix it was that new chain. But like, again, a way to fix things is like, through God to help strengthen you. I guess tie it back into chain, like strengthen the chain and *[short pause]* different bonds with your family *[short pause]* can help strengthen that too. So you can, I guess, move on with life and like, the chain is like very cyclic. Same with life.

As with the above example, many participants used everyday objects in their environments to connect with their death experience. Although these objects were often innocuous, to the participant they held deep seated meaning, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> R: Well when I was thinking *[emphasis]* of doing it before I did it I thought it probably fairly common ones like the changing of the season's right. So I was going to do like a tree with its leaves gone or you know death of a season kinda thing.
> I: Mhm
> R: […] but I think that's when I was more in my head trying to think of things to do. But when I actually just picked up a camera and just saw common- I mean some of these things are just common things in my house that actually meant *[emphasis]* something to me.

Similarly, the following participant did not realise how everyday items were linked to her loss.

> R: Participating in this study, I found that I did not realise that I linked so many items with my different losses. I really liked that by taking pictures of and talking about these items I was forced to realise these links.

And upon reflection, innocuous items became meaningful to her lived experience.

3.4.2.3 Integration. Participants used connections between their photographs to build the metanarrative. That is, they connected one photograph or topic to another later on in the interview. In some cases, as illustrated in the following example, participants identified the connection between their photographs clearly.

> R: And that is a bad stereotype and I mean like later in the pictures I'll explain more about some other f—event […] I guess just getting to the pictures it was like the—this was at the youth group event the very first time I actually met him.

And for other participants, the connection they made emerged from the metanarrative they developed in the interview. That is, as in the following two excerpts, the participants spontaneously made connections between two photographs.

> R1: One of those, uh, funeral cards. And this one I guess it kind of connects back to the […] gravestones a little bit with the like, it's like a representation of how much people cared about you, kind of thing.

> R2: Um, I guess kinda *[sic]* even really relating it back to the first one, *[pause]* again just like having a family member that's, that's gone forever.

Not only did participants connect photographs, they also made reference to earlier parts of their metanarrative. Such statements as, "I guess this can relate back to that story that I just told," illustrates the dynamic nature of the metanarrative. The photographs allowed participants to form the metanarrative and, ultimately, share their death experience through the use of symbolic representation. By integrating each photograph into their narrative, participants' death "story" transformed in interview.

3.4.3 Exposing Emotion

During the course of the interview, participants openly experienced their emotions to varying degrees. The method allowed participants to move in *and* out of emotion. In some cases, the photograph itself elicited an emotional reaction. In the following example, the participant identified how the photograph made her sit with her discomfort.

> R: I don't like this picture. At all. It really bothers me. Even now to look at it. Um, even though you only see the backs *[emphasis]* of me and my children, um, I can read her body language and *[extension]* it really bothers me. It's the first picture that was ever taken of the three of us after he had died and it's hard to look at still.

For others, emotions surfaced as they shared their story within the interview. In the following example, the participant thoughtfully reflects on her emotional reaction to speaking about the death of her first partner.

> R: So the emotions are pretty ah- pretty close to the surface. *[shaky breath]* Um *[extension]* and maybe they're always quite close to the surface I'm not positive. It might be. Anyways he was my very first boyfriend.

When reflecting on the emotions that they felt in the interview, participants drew connections to how they continue to struggle with such emotions in their daily lives.

> R1: Overwhelmed. And confused and angry and sad *[pause]* Mm, those are still feelings that I feel.

> R2: Guilty, actually. 'Cuz *[sic]* I feel like I should always remember her, like with everything I do but then *[pause]* I don't so, you feel bad. I feel bad that she died for me and then I'm just forgetting about her *[long pause] [quietly]* Yeah.

Participants also reflected on the emotions they experienced during the interview on the follow-up questionnaire. For some participants, they discovered that the interview experience was an opportunity to expose the emotions that they had, for so long, suppressed.

> R1: I learned that some feelings of sadness can stay much longer than you ever expected.

> R2: What I enjoyed most about participating in the study was the opportunity to acknowledge and speak about feelings I had pushed away or had suffocated for so long and had never been able to open up about before. It was nicely cathartic.

> R3: Speaking about my experience […] was beneficial and difficult for me. It brought up many emotions that I have been suppressing for a long time.

Yet, exposing their emotions in the interview was not always an easy task for participants. As one participant described, emotional exposure created a sense of vulnerability.

> R: I felt pretty vulnerable because I do not share my personal experiences with death with people I just met.

Participants were able to move in and out of emotion by relaying on the photographs as an anchor. That is, participants moved away from emotionally laden topics, by making sudden shifts to the next photograph. This method, was in many ways, less intrusive than an interview alone as the participant decided how emotionally invested in the discussion they would become. In some cases, participants moved on to the next photograph with no hesitation and no explanation. In other such cases, participants asked the interviewer for permission to move on the next photograph. For example,

> R: I did not expect this to be this hard. *[laughs] [sniffle]* Can we move on?

Other participants simply acknowledged that they were moving on to the next photograph. For example, the following participants explained that they are changing direction following a particularly emotionally laden discussion.

> R1: *[sniffle] [pause] [exhale]* I'm just gonna go to the next one.
>
> R2: Okay, let's flip this picture. *[laughing]* I don't like looking at that picture anymore *[sniffles]*.
>
> R3: Um *[extension]*, yeah, I don't know what else to say. Um *[extension] [long pause]*, uh, I'll *[extension]*, k, maybe I'll do this one now.

Although such shifts may have been in an attempt to avoid negative emotion associated with a topic of discussion or photograph, some participants found that subsequent photographs elicited the very emotion they were attempting to avoid. As one participant exclaimed, "Oh, good, another *[chuckling]* one!" as she moved on to her next photograph to be faced with the same feelings of sadness identified in an earlier photograph.

3.4.4 Self-Awareness

Using the photo-production method, participants engaged in a deeper level of processing their loss by increased self-awareness. For many participants, they were surprised at the level of commitment they made to their story and explained in the post-interview questionnaire that the research interview was not what they had expected.

> R1: I was fairly shocked at how easy it was to think about things that were once very emotionally difficult but had eased with time and distance. Yet I also felt the opposite as I was struck by how significant the deaths in my life have been despite the fact that I think about them so rarely.
>
> R2: Speaking about each photograph brought up a lot of thoughts that I didn't even know existed.
>
> R3: I realised that I had never really talked about myself or how I was dealing with my loss to anyone before. It was super neat to hear myself talking about thoughts that I had never realised about myself but made total sense when I talked about it. Very glad that I did this.

Indeed, participants reported that they had not expected to cry, react, or express such thoughts and emotions in the research interview. As captured earlier, this process was challenging for participants who felt vulnerable sharing their story.

> R1: It was incredibly difficult discussing the project with [interviewer] during the interview. I felt so vulnerable and exposed, but she was great at handling that!
>
> R2: When I decided to participate in this study I didn't think it would be hard. When I was taking the photos I wanted to capture something outside the box but also what I felt and this was hard in both ways: speaking about my experience was even harder as I get emotional when I talk about it to anyone.

As the following participant explained, the act of taking the photographs for the research study required her to dig deep in order to accurately capture her loss.

> R: I think that because I had to dig so deep and channel the pain I went through in order to accurately capture it in photos I was transported back in time and the pain felt as real as it did then.

By transporting back in time, participants experienced both emotions and thoughts that, in some cases, they had not recognised they had prior to the interview. Participants moved away from a surface level engagement to a deep level of processing. The method allowed for this level of engagement by requiring participants to think about their experience before attending the research interview. Indeed, participants reported that they had in some way prepared to talk about their loss. For some, this was enough preparation and the interview met their expectations.

> I: How did you prepare yourself?
> R1: I just knew I'd have to talk about it so I thought about it *[chuckles]*.
> I: Mhm.
> R1: And when I think about it, it's not just—like it doesn't just hit me all of a sudden it's more gradual into it, instead of just something big happening and all of a sudden realizing that this happened and then having to talk about it instead of thinking about and knowing you're going to have to talk about it. It's just a different kind of mind set.
>
> R2: So taking the pictures actually like made me think more about um, my situations and *[short pause]* um, the events in my life that have been related to death. So, if

> anything, the pictures like added to um, the way I think about it. 'Cuz *[sic]* I'd never really done that before.

For others, even though they "prepared" by taking photos and thinking about what they would talk about, they weren't prepared for what actually happened in the interview. That is, they were, again, overwhelmed with their emotional reaction and the challenge of such that they had not anticipated.

As has been noted within the three former themes, the photographs themselves played an integral part in preparing participants to share their experience of loss. The following participant explained that having the photographs contributed more to her discussion than an interview alone.

> R: I think you got more out of me in an hour and a half than you would ever have gotten out of me if I just sat across from you and you're like 'so tell me about loss in your life'.
> I: Mhm
> R: I'd be like 'no' right? Or I might have superficially told you something but when I see the photo *[emphasis]* it's like you're re-living *[emphasis]* it right?
> I: Right *[quietly]*.
> R: For me?
> I: Mhm.
> R: For some of them not for all of them but for some of them um *[extension]* if your goal is to get people to talk and to open up about it I think the photos help.

Though we can not provide comparative data on the use of photographs versus an interview alone, the reflection provided by the participant is indicative of the influence that the photographs had in eliciting dialogue in their interview.

Overall, the notion of increased self-awareness was the underlying process to the previous themes presented. That is, by providing participants a platform in which they were able to explore their loss, they experienced a greater sense of self-awareness. The sense of agency, transformation, and exposed emotions contributed to an overarching goal – to make meaning of the loss and fit death into their narratives about life.

3.5 Discussion

The focus of this study was on what the photo-production method enabled bereaved students to do and how the method produced such results within the context of a research interview. As discussed in the introduction, researchers have found that many students are reluctant to share their grief with others. As a result, many students experience a sense of loneliness from a lack of social support when bereaved (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). What is unique about the findings of this study is that the photo-production method provided students with a platform in which to discuss a socially unacknowledged experience – bereavement.

We found that the photo-production method allowed bereaved students to experience a sense of agency when they shared the story of their loss by allowing them the freedom and control to choose what they shared and how they shared that information in the interview. Such freedoms ultimately instilled power in the participants. This finding was consistent with that reported by Wang and Burris (1994) in photo-voice. That is, a method that gives authority and power to the participant opens a door into a very private social world for the phenomenon under study (Wang & Burris, 1994). In this case, by instilling participants with greater control, the methodology allowed the interviewer to learn how bereaved students privately coped with death.

We also found that the process was transformative, producing a metanarrative through the symbolic representation of the loss in photographs. What is again unique in this study is that the transformation gave participants insight into their experience and ultimately contributed to a therapy-like, beneficial environment. The method was an avenue into their experience. As one participant reported, the photo-production interview was an opportunity for her to transform the most painful event she had experienced into something beautiful.

Indeed, participants integrated the photographs into a description of their lived experience with loss consistent with more recent cognitive theories of grief. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996), for example, emphasised how continuing bonds as opposed to severing bonds were a healthy part of grief work. The role of grief work, then, was to find ways to maintain a connection with the deceased, construct and reconstruct new connections, and maintain a relationship with the deceased person (Klass et al., 1996). That is, continuing bonds is a healthy process of adaptation and change in the post-death relationship that constructs and reconstructs a new connection to the deceased. Indeed, ties to the deceased are encouraged by supporting the ongoing communication to, and about, the deceased (Klass et al., 1996). By taking photographs of objects in their everyday environment, including those that were described as innocuous or symbolic, participants created connections to a deceased loved one. Such connections helped continue a bond between present life and a past relationship in interview.

Similarly, Neimeyer (2000) argued that grieving does not involve letting go of a loved one but involves a healthy maintenance of continued symbolic bonds. According to the meaning-making theory proposed by Neimeyer (2000), grieving is a cognitive process that supplements emotional processes. Death can significantly contribute to a revision in one's self-identify and for some this may be life-enhancing. Such losses may also alter lived constructions or assumptions about the world in which we function. Neimeyer (2000) emphasised that coping with loss involves how we relate to others. Within this research context, participants engaged in a cognitive process in which they constructed the loss within their life assumptions. They developed a metanarrative that transformed in meaning through the use of the photographs. During this process, the bereaved participants were required to relate socially to the interviewer in order to formulate a description of their death experience.

The photo-production method also facilitated an emotional experience during the interview. Participants described the emotional experience as cathartic, as a release of thought and emotion that was for some time suppressed, and as a general sense of vulnerability. Our findings were similar to Balk (1997) who found that many students reported a positive experience after talking about their loss. Before cognitive theories attempted to explain grief, many theorists argued that grieving was an emotional divesting. Freud (1922) argued that those who are grieving need time to mourn and time to sever their attachment to the deceased. That is, a fixed amount of energy that was once invested (cathected) in a loved one needed to be retrieved (decathected) before the bereaved person could be free to re-invest in someone or something else (Freud, 1922).

Worden (1983) explained that grief work required the bereaved individual to accept the reality of the loss, to work through the pain of grief, to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missed, and to withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in another relationship. Similar to Freud (1922), Worden (1983) emphasized letting go of the bond to the deceased by disengaging emotionally and moving on to another relationship. For these emotion-focused theorists, grieving was an emotional experience that needed to be resolved before the bereaved can move on to connect emotionally to others. Notably, Worden (2008) replaced the notion of reinvesting in another relationship in a third revision of the tasks, to emotionally relocate the deceased, indicative of the movement away from severing bonds towards continuing bonds with the deceased. We found that the photo-production method allowed bereaved students an opportunity to do grief work in interview. The emotions that surfaced in interview were normalized. This was a sense of exposure for participants. That is, by

experiencing emotions (including pain) in a safe space, students were validated and given the opportunity to experience emotions that connected them to the deceased.

We found that an increased self-awareness was underlying the above noted themes, which enabled participants to reach a deep level of processing by experiencing and re-experiencing the loss within the research context. Stroebe and Schut (1999) introduced The Dual Process Model (DPM), an integrative model of grief resolution, which gathers together a number of contrasting tasks including acknowledging the reality of the loss *and* acknowledging the reality of a changed world, experiencing the pain of grief *and* taking time off from the pain of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The photo-production method allowed participants a platform in which they could acknowledge the reality of their loss by telling their story. Stroebe and Schut (2010) described oscillation as central to the DPM. In oscillation, the bereaved alternate between loss-oriented coping (i.e., the intrusion of grief where emotions may range from pleasant reminiscing to painful longing) and restoration-oriented coping (avoiding grief and assuming new roles and relationships). For example, at one time the griever will confront the loss; at another time they will avoid their grief. For participants, the photo-production method provided the opportunity to experience loss-oriented coping – something that some had for so long avoided. They had to confront their loss, build insight into their experience, and they became more self-aware with regards to the role that the loss played in their present life through the telling and retelling of their story with each photograph. Stroebe and Schut (2010) argued that over time, habituation occurs from the repeated exposure and confrontation, and grief diminishes. The photo-production method exposed bereaved participants to the loss, and as discussed in the earlier themes, such exposure ranged from cognitive restructuring to emotional divesting.

Together, our findings suggest that the use of the photo-production method in this study contributed to a therapy-like environment for the bereaved students who participated. As outlined in our analysis, the photo-production method allowed participants the flexibility to move in-and-out of emotional states while building on their meta-narrative. Research regarding the expression of emotions as they relate to distressing life events is controversial. Similar to emotion-focused grief theorists who posited that grief work required bereaved individuals to emotionally relocate the deceased (Freud, 1922; Worden 2008), Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) suggested that disclosing emotions through writing about a wide-range of stressful situations is good practice as it contributes to physical well-being. Yet other scholars have argued the opposite, that disclosing emotion is not positively related to emotional relief (Zech & Rimé, 2005). Indeed, Stroebe and colleagues (2006) report in a review of the literature that most studies of grief have failed to find that individuals who engage in emotion-work related to their loss benefit from the process. The authors argue, however, that the lack of support for emotion-work has to do specifically with the Pennebaker paradigm and not other viable emotion-work (Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe, 2006). That is, simply disclosing or "venting" about an event is not sufficient enough to warrant benefits to the bereaved. Rather, the bereaved benefit most from engaging in a process that both exposes emotion and involves cognitive restructuring as described in the DPM (Stroebe et al., 2006). What is unique about the photo-production method is that participants exposed their emotion in a manner that both allowed emotions to surface but also allowed the emotions to be processed. That is, as the interview progressed and participants experienced "new" versions of their story, they also developed a new cognitive understanding of the loss as it relates to their present-day life.

The photo-production method as implicated in this study served as an emotional buffer for participants. That is, by relying on the photographs as an anchor, participants were able to move away from emotion if overwhelmed, by moving on to the next photograph, and also to move toward emotion when a photograph was particularly emotion-laden. This process eliminated the harmful impact of rumination-based ventilation, or simply getting "stuck" in negative emotion, that was described as harmful by Stroebe and colleagues (2006).

Secondly, the photo-production method allowed participants to engage in what appeared to be meaningful cognitive restructuring. That is, participants' loss experience appeared to be transformed within the research interview as they developed new narratives about their loss as they explored and explained their pictures. Indeed, according to research by Neimeyer and colleagues (2006), meaning making is related to better grief outcomes. That is, bereaved individuals benefit greatly from making sense of their loss and fitting the loss into their assumptive worlds (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). An inability to make sense of the death is likely to lead to increased problems post-bereavement (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006). The photo-production method actively encouraged participants to engage with the materials of their loss. That is, participants were required to begin to think about their death experience pre-interview by taking photographs. This preparation in conjunction with the meaning-making that occurred in the interview was a pivotal component of their participation and, upon reflection, participants reported that they built new understandings as a result of talking about their loss. However, it is not yet clear how deep or long-lasting these changes were for participants.

Finally, we posit that the photo-production method themes identified above appeared to be therapy-like for participations. That is, as is consistent in the psychotherapy literature, instilling power and agency within an individual, in this case a bereaved student, is likely to be

therapeutically significant. That is, participants reported that they felt vulnerable throughout the research process. Permitting participants to decide what they share, how they shared that experience, and interfering very little with the process allowed the method to be participant-centered, thereby mitigating their sense of vulnerability.

There are two overall conclusions from this study. First, the themes identified in this study are not so much about grieving but how this process of taking photographs and talking about a death experience facilitated growth in dealing with loss. Using the DP model proposed by Strobe and colleagues (2006), participants demonstrated restoration-oriented coping strategies in interview. Second, although an article written by researchers Heisley and Levy (1991) cited a hierarchy of abstraction as proposed by Collier and Collier (as cited in Heisley & Levy, 1991), where photographs were considered to be the lowest level of abstraction lacking psychological responses and free association, we challenge this assumption based on the results of this study. That is, the results of this study suggest that photo-production is not a low-level of abstraction.

Given that research on the use of photo-methods to study the bereaved is scarce, more research is needed to explore the benefits of this method. Again, researchers have demonstrated that the university population is particularly vulnerable to feeling isolated and alone (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015; Shultz, 2007). At the same time, there appears to be a reluctance on their part to seek services when bereaved (Cox et al., 2015). Perhaps integrating photography into counselling sessions, an easily accessible method by many university students, will promote meaning making within this population and lessening the consequences of neglecting to reflect on one's loss.

There are also several implications of this study. First, although the focus of this study was specifically on bereaved university students, the findings here are likely applicable to a

larger population including those individuals who seek therapeutic services in the community. The use of visual media will also likely serve well with non-verbal populations. The photo-production method has the potential to be a therapeutic intervention. That is, it proved to be useful in building rapport with participants as it was less threatening than an interview alone and, as a result, may contribute to the facilitation of growth. Future studies should evaluate this method as an intervention with individuals who are struggling with the loss of a loved one and evaluate how the method may contribute to change post-intervention.

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CHAPTER 4: Study 3

A Visual Analysis of Photographs Taken by Bereaved Students

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4.1 Abstract

Many young adults document their lives through photographs and share such images publically. Yet, little is known on how such an accessible method can be used to understand lived experience with loss. Researchers have thus-far neglected to systematically analyse visual data, when such methods as photo-elicitation have been used to study psychological constructs and photo-methods have been largely underused in grief research. The purpose of this study was to analyse photographs produced by bereaved university students using a polytextual thematic analysis for visual data. Sixteen bereaved university students participated in this study. Each student produced 10 photographs and a total of 160 photographs were used in the analysis. The photographs were analysed on three dimensions: structure, content, and effect. Participants submitted photographs that were structurally sophisticated. The content of photographs ranged from what is considered typical representations of death and loss in Western socio-culture for bereaved young adults to those that are considered atypical. Photographs also elicited emotional and cognitive reactions in the observer. The findings of this study suggest that, although there appears to be a prototypical expression of grief for bereaved young adults within visual tropes identified in the structure, content, and effect of the photographs, loss is certainly an idiosyncratic process. Indeed, the photographs were individual expressions that captured the overall difficulty in conveying the meaning of a loss.

Keywords: Grief, Bereavement, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis, Photo-production, Photography, Death, Loss, Memento Mori

4.2 A Visual Analysis of Photographs Taken by Bereaved Students

4.2.1 General Introduction

Photography is an age-old practice and it is often used to capture life's most precious moments. With the vast increase in photograph applications and smart technology, taking and sharing photographs has never been more accessible (Cann, 2014). Indeed, young adults are among the leading users of various photo-applications (e.g., Instagram and Snapchat; Pittman & Reich, 2016). With a natural gravitation towards technology, it comes as no surprise that many young adults visually document a detailed story of their lives and share their story publically.

Although all of us will experience the death of a significant loved one, the unfortunate reality is that the grief associated with such loss will likely be topics avoided by others (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). The university population is prone to feeling isolated, alone, and misunderstood following the death of a loved one (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015; Shultz, 2007). There also appears to be a reluctance on the part of young individuals to seek professional help when bereaved (Cox et al., 2015), increasing the likelihood that they will suffer emotionally in silence.

4.2.2 Death Attitudes in the Victorian Era

Cultural attitudes about death have naturally shifted with time. At present, death talk is considered taboo in mainstream society, more so than in the past. There was a time, however, when death was widely accepted and considered to be an expected part of life. The Victorian era was a time in which there was a particularly prominent epistemological shift in death attitudes (McKinley, 2012). Higher mortality rates and economic instability were two factors that likely contributed to this change where death was no longer a "natural" part of life. Instead, there was an emphasis on mourning rituals that intended to prolong the acknowledgement of the death and

preserve the deceased in memory. McKinley (2012) studied death-related artifacts in the Victorian era, including cemetery repositories. The researcher found that such artifacts demonstrated a desire for survivors to maintain a continued presence or relationship to the deceased after death (McKinley, 2012). This desire was considered to be a novel and distinct feature of the Victorian era.

The connection between photographs and loss to continue the relationship with the deceased is not a new one. McKinley (2012) argued that such artifacts as post-mortem portraits represented a continuity of the relationship between the living and the dead. More recently, Summersgill (2015) examined Victorian-era familial expressions of pain in post-mortem portraits. An examination of the portraits suggested that the deceased were purposefully posed. Such poses were meant to be indicative of (1) the deceased's experience in the afterlife (e.g., peaceful in portrait, peaceful in afterlife); (2) the role of religion, primarily referring to the Protestant beliefs in American death portraits; (3) how the family cared for the deceased before and after death; and (4) a positive image of the deceased (Summersgill, 2015).

4.2.2.1 Visual tropes. Summersgill (2015) referred to the cues obtained in the portraits as visual tropes – common or overused themes or devices. That is, visual tropes or cues within a portrait helped observers to understand or bracket the loss within the bereaved person's life. For example, visual tropes such as a familial gaze (originally discussed by Hirsch, 1999), or the 'act of looking' by the family (e.g., a mother holding her deceased child in her hands), were intended to elicit the awareness that the image was taken for, or viewed by, the family (Summersgill, 2015). As a result, such portraits of the deceased were meant to elicit empathy in observers. Indeed, Summersgill (2015) posited that some portraits elicit empathy to the degree that an

observer may momentarily experience the familial gaze even as an outsider, creating a bond between the observer and the bereaved family by way of the portrait.

4.2.3 Post-Loss Photography

Visual representations of loss today using post-mortem photography are similar to the photographs of the Victorian era. Post-mortem photography today has also included coping with perinatal loss (Blood & Cacciatore, 2014, Hochberg, 2011; Jones, 2002, Primeau & Recht, 1994). An examination of this literature suggests many parallels between Victorian-era portraiture and post-mortem perinatal loss photography. Indeed, today post-mortem perinatal photographs resemble those described in the familial gaze (Hirsch, 1999) wherein families are often photographed holding and gazing at their deceased child.

Although there is limited literature that specifically examines post-loss photography, researchers have, for some time, explored the way in which using existing family photographs can also facilitate a continued relationship with the deceased (Riches & Dawson, 1998) that is, ultimately, therapeutic (Simmons, 2009; Weiser, 2010). However, there are no research studies to date that examine photo-production with bereaved populations (i.e., asking the bereaved to take photographs for the purposes of describing their lived experience with death) and certainly no studies have reported on the actual visual photographs themselves. According to Radley (2011), merely analysing verbal accounts about visual data "fails to address how people make sense with pictures as well as making sense of them (p. 17)."

4.2.3.1 Memorial tattoos. Another way in which researchers have looked at visual data is by examining the role of memorial tattoos. Such visual images as memorial tattoos are referred to as "powerful projections" that provoke emotions in both observers and the bereaved (Davidson & Duhig, 2016; p. 63). According to Davidson and Duhig (2016), images of memorial

tattoos are a gateway to a continuing bond with deceased loved ones. Similar to both Victorian-era portraiture and post-mortem perinatal photography, memorial tattoos are a means by which the bereaved can share in their memories of the deceased with others. Indeed, according to Davidson and Duhig (2016) the dialogue facilitated by memorial tattoo images is presumed to maintain the memories of the deceased and such dialogue allows the griever to both seek and receive support from others. Multiple meanings of the images are then created each time the griever talks about the tattoo (Davidson & Duhig, 2016).

Davidson and Duhig (2016) described five primary purposes of memorial tattoos. That is, the memorial tattoos serve as a visual representation of change and help the bereaved adjust to loss. Interestingly, the three remaining purposes of memorial tattoos identified by Davidson and Duhig (2016) are similar to the role of photographs in the grieving process identified in our earlier research (Dadgostari & Chartier, 2018): to continue the bond with the deceased, embody the bereaved individual's grief, and promote dialogue on a topic that is taboo and difficult to talk about (Davidson, 2017). Unfortunately, the focus of memorial tattoo research has primarily been on the role of the narrative in facilitating a continued relationship with the deceased and not on the visual images themselves.

4.2.4 Visual Image Research

Of the research studies that focus exclusively on visual data analysis (irrespective of the content being analysed), most report on athletes in sport (Buysse & Borcherding, 2010; Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004; Pedersen, 2002; Wolter, 2015). Research studies on visual images of athletes in sport used content analyses to examine how athletes are portrayed in visual media, including newspapers, magazines, and website pages (Buysse & Borcherding, 2010; Buysse &

Embser-Herbert, 2004; Pedersen, 2002; Wolter, 2015). Content analysis, a quantitative methodology, is an analysis of the frequency with which a particular theme appears in a data set.

Beyond athletes and sport, other quantitative researchers have examined photographs used in social media. Hum and colleagues (2011), for example, examined identity construction and gender roles on the Facebook profile pages of university students. The researchers reported on the difference between the genders' representations of themselves in their photographs (Hum et al., 2011). Fahmy (2004) examined the portrayal of Afghan women in the Associated Press during and after the Taliban regime using content analysis. She reported on the significant difference between the time points using chi-square analyses (Fahmy, 2004).

Although such research on visual data exists, most of the research cited above has relied heavily on quantitative research methods (e.g., content analysis). Such reliance on pre-existing themes to code photographs and calculate the statistical significance with which the photographs fit into each theme may be limiting. Specifically, the pre-determined codes may be limiting as researchers attempt to "fit" the data into themes, rather than ground the analysis in the actual visual data.

In qualitative research studies, the role of images in advertising has been a focus of social psychology. In a study by Gill (2011), for example, the researcher focused on the shift in how male bodies were increasingly objectified in visual advertisements. In this study, Gill examined the cultural shift in imag-based communication by analysing magazine photographs of male models. Although Gill (2011) did not describe a specific visual analysis method, she provided a descriptive analysis informed by critical theory in socio-cultural literature.

Health research has also attempted to analyse visual data. Gibson and colleagues (2015), for example, recently examined health and illness as demarcated on breast cancer websites.

Using Gleeson's (2011) polytextual method for visual data, the researchers analysed four Australian breast cancer websites. The authors explained that they initially recorded their detailed impression of each webpage, while repeatedly assessing each piece of data. They included descriptive notes on each website while examining the text, images, colour, and layout. The authors reported on the patterns, codes, and broader discursive themes that they established and identified a "dominant message" for the collective data set that "women can live well with breast cancer (Gibson, Lee & Crabb, 2015, p. 2)."

Similarly, in a study by Frith (2011), women who had undergone chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer were asked to take photographs to document how they experienced their altered appearance in this process. Although the photographs themselves were not the subject of analysis, the author emphasized that the participants decided what stories can be shared with the outside world and were ultimately far more in charge of what was contributed to the research interview than the researcher initially acknowledged (Frith, 2011).

Thus, the existing literature quite clearly suggests that there is limited research that has systematically analysed visual data and none has specifically examined death-related visual data. The lack of research within this domain suggests that this is an area worth exploring in the present research study.

4.2.5 Purpose and Rationale

Young adults increasingly document their lives through photographs and share such images on social media for others to see. Analysing visual data is a relatively new research methodology. Within the field of psychology, researchers have focused on how visual methods elicit dialogue from participants. Historically, however, they have failed to systematically analyse the actual visual data in that process (Gibson et al., 2015; Gleeson, 2011). Relying solely

on verbal or written data limits our understanding of complex issues. Loss, for example, is a particularly challenging experience to verbally share with others and speaking about death is often taboo in our society.

Analyses of earlier portraiture such as that of the Victorian era suggest that earlier portraits of death were meant to bring comfort to the bereaved but such portraits fit existing visual tropes (Summersgill, 2015). Notably, both Victorian-era portraits and modern-day photography often exclude the period of dying – a period often considered to be the end of life and not a part of life (Horne, 2013). Indeed, the dying are rarely photographed and often excluded from visual photography (Horne, 2013).

Although a few researchers have used existing photographs to examine the experience of the bereaved (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014), no studies have examined visual photographs that participants produced for the purposes of illustrating their lived experience with death. There is a need for a more data-driven method to analyse death-related visual data. Thus, we asked how death-related loss is photographed by bereaved university students. That is, the purpose of this study was to systematically describe and understand the meaning of the photographs that were captured by bereaved university students.

4.2.6 Epistemology and Methodology

We assumed a social constructionist epistemology for this study. That is, we acknowledged that the data produced for this study were inherently influenced by certain social processes (Crotty, 1998). We recognised that our understanding of grief is influenced by our time and culture and that the data produced in this research was constructed by way of social action. We were critical of such pre-existing social processes (e.g., how loss should be represented

visually) and considered their impact on the subsequent analysis of the research data (Burr, 2003).

A polytextual thematic analysis for visual data (Gleeson, 2011) was well-suited to our epistemology and research questions. According to Gleeson (2011), this method considers that the researcher's pre-existing understanding of social images and cultural knowledge will influence their interpretation of the visual data. Polytextual thematic analysis is a method that is similar to the thematic analysis of verbal data (Gleeson, 2011). Visual data are analysed by "reading" each visual text in relation to another. That is, common themes are found within the data by analysing across the data set. Just as a thematic analysis begins with initial codes that are later collapsed and divided into over-arching themes, within polytextual thematic analysis, Gleeson (2011) describes beginning with proto-themes that are then developed (using a step-wise analytic procedure) into final themes. We argue that such methodology is far more systematic than the clinical case examples that are currently available in the thanatology literature (e.g., Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014) and an appropriate method for the present study.

4.3 Method

This study was approved by the behavioural research ethics board of a Canadian University. All participants were informed of the nature and involvement of their participation in this study. Each participant provided both verbal and written consent to participate in a clinical interview and to share their photographs in the dissemination of the research findings.

4.3.1 Participants

Participants were enrolled in a 200-level Psychology of Death and Dying course at a Western Canadian University. A brief in-class presentation was provided to all students who attended class. The presentation described the purpose, process, and compensation involved to

participate in the research study. All subsequent communications with participants, with the exception of the research interview, were via email.

Photographs produced by 16 students whose research interviews were used in an analysis of the photo-production methodology (Dadgostari & Chartier, 2018) were included in the analysis of the current study. Participants were included in data analysis if they met the following criteria: (1) the participant talked about a death-related loss; (2) the focus of their account was on significant persons for the majority of the interview; (3) the participant self-reported that the death was life-changing; and (4) the participant produced 10 photographs.

Of the 16 students included in the current study, 3 of the participants self-identified as male and 13 participants self-identified as female. The age of participants ranged between 19 and 46 years with the majority of participants (88%) between 19 and 23 years of age. Participants discussed the death of a cousin (1), parent (2), sister (2), romantic partner (2), grandparent (4), and best friend (4).

4.3.2 Visual Data

Each participant was asked to think about the impact of death on their lived experience and to capture their loss in 10 self-produced photographs using a digital camera. A total of 160 photographs were used in the current analysis. Participants used various digital cameras to capture photographs, based on what was available to them at the time of the study. We asked participants to include only 10 photographs based on previous research findings that suggested interview productivity significantly decreased with greater than 10 photographs (Heisley & Levy, 1991).

Participants were encouraged to be “creative” and “symbolic” in the photographs that they captured. They could choose to edit their digital photographs. We asked participants to take

the time to reflect on their experience and, indeed, participants were provided with several weeks or more between the time they were informed of the research study to the time they submitted their photographs for a research interview.

Participants were also asked to entitle each photograph. Both the verbal and written instructions informed participants not to use existing photographs (e.g., family portraits, baby photos), internet photographs (e.g., images from internet search engines), or photographs of faces. By instructing participants to include only self-produced photographs, we hoped to foster meaningful engagement with the impact of the loss on their lives (Gauntlett, 2007; Majumdar, 2011).

4.3.3 Analytic Procedure

Although visual data analysis is relatively new within the field of psychology, using a psychological lens to analyse visual data has much to contribute to the literature on coping with loss. We used the 11-step analytic procedure introduced by psychology researcher Gleeson (2011) to analyse the visual data produced for our research project.

According to Gleeson (2011), polytextual thematic analysis begins by viewing all photographs. We uploaded each photograph into NVivo10, a computer software program designed to help organize qualitative research data. We then examined all photographs in various orders and we did not limit our viewings by grouping photographs by participant. During this initial stage of the analysis, we also considered how social and cultural assumptions may have influenced our interpretation of the data. We then created initial codes or "proto-themes" to capture recurring visual images. Each proto-theme was defined and subject to change as we continued to analyse the data. As outlined by Gleeson (2011), we made note of all reactions we had to the photographs. The development of the proto-themes was rather dynamic, as each was

revised, collapsed, or divided as necessary. We then compared each proto-theme to one another to see if they were, indeed, distinct. We then organized the proto-themes into overarching themes, ensuring to maximize differentiation between each theme and defining higher-order themes in this process.

4.4 Analysis

The analysis of this study focused exclusively on the visual data that bereaved participants produced for the research study (Dadgostari & Chartier, 2018). Polytextual thematic analysis (Gleeson, 2011) was used to specifically study the visual data. Broadly, we identified various themes within each photograph. That is, each photograph contained visual cues. The visual cues were categorized into three dimensions: structure, content, and effect. The table below provides a summary of the findings. The following is a description of the three dimensions using photographs from the data set to illustrate each. Photographs from the sample are also included as figures in this document. These photographs were selected because they aptly illustrated the themes described below. Sharing these photographs was also an attempt to showcase the inspiring work of our participants, who permitted us a glimpse into their very private and painful worlds.

Table 4.1

Study 3 Summary of Findings

Theme	**Description**
Structure	Post-hoc editing used by photographers to alter colour, saturation, and sharpness.
Content	The objects and people that were photographed categorised by visual trope: western societal trope, metaphorical trope, and religious trope.
Effect	The emotional or cognitive reactions of the observer when the photograph was examined in isolation from the verbal data obtained in research interviews.

4.4.1 Structure

At the most basic level of interpretation, each photograph was categorised by its visual structure. We defined structure as the post-hoc editing that the photographers used. We found that the photographs differed in colour, saturation, and sharpness. Some photographs were edited using a photo-editing program or filter. Such edits suggested that the photographer engaged in a process after the photograph was initially captured.

4.4.1.1 Colour. With regards to colour, photographs appeared in black and white, colour, and in both black, white and colour. Though the use of colour is not surprising, the use of colour to contrast between points in time is significant. Figure 4.1, for example, illustrates how colour and black and white were used to contrast between the bereaved student's past and present life. The present, or life after death, is depicted in black and white. The past, or life with the loved one, is depicted in colour. Such cues in the photograph are likely meant to help the observer understand that there is a marked difference in the life of the bereaved before and after death. Indeed, in Figure 1, colour cues the observer to a brighter or happier time whereas the black and white contrast cues the observer to a darker and likely more sad time in the bereaved student's life.

4.4.1.2 Saturation. Photographs also differed in colour saturation. That is, some photographs were highly saturated while others were dull. Both colour and saturation appeared to reflect meaning. Life before death was associated with a vibrant and colourful world. But life during and after death was often enveloped in darkness. As such, colour and saturation were used to convey meaning before and after death.

4.4.1.3 Visual distortions. While editing photographs after they were captured, participants also edited photographs to visually distort objects. First, we distinguished between

photographs that we assumed were not purposefully distorted and those that were purposefully distorted. For photographs that we assumed were not purposefully distorted, we attributed camera quality to the difference in photo quality. That is, camera quality (e.g., cell phone camera) was assumed to primarily account for those photographs with poor and pixelated resolutions, which may appear to be visually distorted. Thus, we did not examine these distortions further.

With regards to those photographs that appeared to be purposefully distorted, we first considered that the instructions of the study asked participants to conceal faces of individuals whom they did not have permission to photograph as these individuals may appear in the dissemination of the research project. Such distortions were assumed to be a product of the study instructions. Thus, we did not examine these distortions any further. We considered only those visual distortions that were purposeful and not a product of the instructions given to participants, as being an artistic expression worth examining.

Bereaved students who purposefully blurred or concealed components of their photograph did so to provide a cue to the observer. In Figure 4.2, the face of the deceased was concealed with a solid block while the faces of the survivors in the photograph were just blurred. This contrast provides the observer with a harsh reality: a difference between the living and the permanence of the dead. That is, by concealing the face of the dead entirely, the observer comes to the conclusion that they will never know the deceased as their face is never to be seen again. Overall, participants structured their photographs (colour, saturation and distortion) to convey meaning and potentially to elicit an emotional reaction or possible empathy from the observer.

In addition to purposeful changes to colour and visual distortions, participants made structural changes that defied study instructions. For example, participants submitted a collage

(i.e., two or more photographs assembled together) as one photograph. That is, although participants were asked to submit only 10 photographs, this increased the number of photographs included in their submission. Others included words (e.g., religious quotes, writing on candles) in their photographs in some capacity. Finally, although participants were asked to take original photographs, some included photographs of photographs. Such loopholes, though clever, demonstrate the importance of how such structural changes influence the participant's ability to express their lived experience with death. That is, some participants in their efforts to convey meaning fell back into using words.

In sum, these participants actively engaged with their photos, altering structural components to create visual cues for the observer of the photograph. These changes all seemed to reflect a desire to express in their own way what they had experienced, apparently wanting others to pull out meaning and possibly empathise with their experience.

4.4.2 Content

The content of each photograph was analysed. We defined content as the objects and people that were photographed. We distinguished the content of the photographs into those images that fit common visual tropes (for example, cemeteries, caskets, and burials). The categories were then aggregated into larger themes: Western Societal Trope, Metaphorical Trope, and Religious Trope.

4.4.2.1 Western societal trope. The photographs captured by the bereaved students contained content that fit with common western societal mourning rituals and practices. Participants included photographs of caskets (e.g., Figure 4.3), cemeteries and burial sites, memorial cards, and flowers. All such photographs situated the loss within a Western funeral practice suggesting that bereaved students experience their loss within a common set of socio-

cultural practices. For example, flowers, which were once reserved to mask the smell of a deceased body, have become a staple of western funerary tradition due to the commercialisation of the funerary industry. In the Victorian era the intricacy of flowers in post-mortem photography signified the bereaved family's social status and power (Summersgill, 2015). Today, some may argue that the funeral industry takes advantage of the bereaved's need to express their loss through physical tokens (Summersgill, 2015). Such physical tokens of Western funeral practices were captured by the bereaved students in their photographs.

4.4.2.2 Religious trope. The photographs captured by bereaved students contained religious content. Religious objects included church buildings, a cross, and bible quotes. All such photographs situated the loss within a religious culture, again, suggesting that bereaved students experience their loss within a common set of socio-cultural practices. However, the religious photographs did not go beyond the typical socio-cultural representation of religion and loss. That is, although historically religion was often used as a coping mechanism (Corr & Corr, 2012) for the bereaved and a major contributor to making meaning and sense of the death of a loved one, it did not appear to figure prominently in the lives of these participants in the interviews, and it was unclear where religion fit for this particular age group. That is, most participants did not speak to the influence of religion on their grief experience in interview.

4.4.2.3 Metaphorical trope. The bereaved students included objects in their photographs that appeared to be metaphors for their experience with loss. Such photographs included the changing of seasons, food, and alcohol. The change in seasons between fall and winter is often used to symbolise death or an ending (Figure 4.4). The change between winter and spring often is used to symbolise hope, rebirth, and change. Food represented nourishment. Alcohol is both a common contributor to the premature death of young adults but also a common maladaptive

coping strategy for a young griever. Other photographs included empty bedrooms and lamps. An empty bedroom taken using a mirror (Figure 4.5) seems to reflect an empty space as a result of the death. A person looking outside a window (Figure 4.6) likely represents a gaze into the unknown. A photograph of origami (Figure 4.7) may symbolise a memory or connection to the deceased. While such photographs are more likely to leave the observer wanting more information, such objects do not fit into the concrete schemas typically associated with death and loss. That is, these photographs appear to be metaphors for their experiences.

Metaphorical photographs were not always readily recognisable, which suggests that such photographs are person- and loss-specific but they are meant to evoke an emotional response from the observer. For example, figure 4.8 is a photograph of a feather on water, likely representing both the flow of life and the ephemeral aspect of a life. Such metaphorical photographs appeared to be less of a trope in the traditional sense, but a trope that represents the difficulty of conveying the meaning of significant loss. That is, when participants were unable to visually capture their experience, they used metaphors.

4.4.3 Effect

The third dimension identified in the photographs was the effect the photograph had on the observer. We defined effect as the emotional or cognitive reactions of the researchers when the photograph was examined in isolation from the verbal data gained from the research interview. The effect of the photograph is that which Summersgill (2015) described as the ability of a visual trope or cue to elicit a reaction (often empathy) in the observer. The photographer's ability to use artistic creativity enabled visual cues that elicited a reaction in the observer. Indeed, some photographs were particularly emotionally-laden. We described these photographs as provocative (Figure 4.9), raw (Figure 4.10), and shocking (Figure 4.11). Provocative in the sense

that the photograph was angry yet enticing. Raw in the sense that the photograph was bare yet real. Shocking in the sense that the photograph depicted the brutal reality of a painful death.

For the images that were commonly associated with loss, we assumed that there were broad meaning systems, based on our preconceived notions that certain objects must represent certain aspects of a loss. For example, photographs of a crash scene or burial site are two such categories that likely do not require much verbal explanation as the former indicates the cause of death and the latter represents a traditional funerary practice. However, there is an important distinction to be made with regards to the content of photographs. Although some photographs are readily recognized as typical or traditional representations of loss, the personal meaning attributed to the photographs (beyond content) certainly cannot be assumed.

While we cannot know another's feelings, observers are forced to feel and experience in these photographs. Much like in the young adult development, the experience of bereaved students as captured in the photographs ranged from the concrete to the abstract. Observers may not understand the bereaved individual's personal experience but the photographs were received as evocative. Even the concrete photographs captured were evocative. For example, in Figure 4.3, a photograph of an elderly man beside the casket of his beloved begs the question, "what is his life going to be like now?"

4.5 Discussion

Analysing visual data is not without challenges. As researchers, we struggled to keep the results (i.e., a verbal task) true to the data (i.e., non-verbal photographs) without making assumptions. We were cognizant that, unlike verbal data, reaching a latent level of analysis would be difficult and problematic if we made interpretations based solely on assumptions of what a photograph represented for a bereaved student without their verbal explanation. As a

result, we focused exclusively on that which we could see and feel resulting in three dimensions to the data examined: structure, content, and effect. We assumed then, that unlike quantitative research studies that use pre-determined codes to fit the data into themes, our analysis allowed us to ground the analysis in the visual data thereby strengthening our conclusions.

Broadly, we found that the photographs were diverse in their structure, content, and effect. Some participants submitted photographs that were structurally sophisticated and they had engaged in some post-hoc editing. As noted earlier, Summersgill (2015) defined visual tropes as cues or themes that were obtained from post-mortem portraits that help observers to understand the loss within the bereaved person's life. We categorized the content of photographs in the typical western societal trope, religious trope, and metaphorical trope based on Summersgill's definition of tropes. For photographs where the content was clear, the participants captured objects that were very commonly associated with death. Metaphorical objects such as mementos were not necessarily clear in their meaning and would likely need to be supplemented by a research interview. Rarely did the photographs capture the practical facets of grief (e.g., such as financial concerns that many bereaved caregivers, face after the death of a partner). It is likely that the age of participants was a factor in such exclusions. Additionally, some photographs elicited emotional and cognitive reactions in the observer.

Together, the photographs taken by bereaved students were both representations of death and a representation of how people cope with death. Representations of death were captured in the *memento mori*. *Memento mori* is a Latin term used to capture human mortality. It is the idea that we must all eventually die. That is, common objects such as accident scenes, caskets, and burial sites, served as reminders that death was present and an inevitability. These photographs seem to represent post-modern *memento mori.* That is, most often death and loss are topics that

are avoided, taboo, or described as more pleasant than what is experienced in the reality of a bereaved individual. Such photographs did not mask the reality of death. They moved beyond the common or acceptable representations of loss to those that brought the reality of death shockingly forward.

The practice of taking photographs also allowed for the representations of how people cope with death. Examining the photographs along with the interview data, we noticed that participants used linking objects to connect their lives with the memory of the deceased, e.g., the empty bedroom that once belonged to the deceased. Indeed, this practice enabled participants an opportunity to continue their bond to the deceased. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) emphasized how continuing bonds are a healthy part of recovery. Healthy grieving included finding ways to maintain a connection with the deceased, construct and reconstruct new connections, and maintain a relationship with the deceased person. The goal of grief work (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) becomes movement towards the deceased in an attempt to engage in the relationship in a new and ongoing manner. Indeed, ties to the deceased are encouraged by supporting the ongoing communication to, and about, the deceased. Such findings are similar to that described by Davidson and Duhig (2016), where visual images were considered a gateway to continuing a bond or relationship with a deceased loved one.

At the same time that the participant continued a relationship to the deceased, the visual tropes within the photographs enabled the observer to connect to the bereaved. Particularly, the photographs elicited empathy in observers based on their often shocking and evocative portrayals of loss. Representations of the painful reality of loss (as seen in figures 9, 10, and 11) that illustrate a suffering bereaved individual are more likely to pull for support and comfort from the viewer. Such findings are similar to that described by Summersgill (2015) where Victorian-era

portraits elicited empathy to the degree that a bond was created between the observer and the bereaved family by way of the photograph.

Similar to the conclusions made by Davidson and Duhig (2016) with regards to memorial tattoos, the photographs in this study also appeared to be powerful projections that evoked emotions in both observers and the bereaved participants. In a sense, the photographs appeared to be the way in which the participants attempted to evoke the strangeness of their emotion. Although the observer experienced empathy, the photographs also introduced a sense of strangeness or inability to fully comprehend what the bereaved experienced in their loss.

Such connections between participant and interviewer are described in trauma-based emotion-focused intervention as evocative empathy (Ralston, 2006). Often used with survivors of sexual-abuse trauma, the purpose of evocative empathy is to focus on the memories of the trauma, facilitate arousal, express emotions, identify unmet needs, access adaptive information, modify maladaptive meanings, and resolve interpersonal issues with others (Ralston, 2006). In therapy, clients are empowered and new perspectives on their past traumas are facilitated through the exploration of their memories and feelings with an empathic therapist (Ralston, 2006). Similarly, we found that the photographs contributed to the empathy experienced by the interviewer, enabling the interview to explore the memories of the loss in interview (Dadgostari & Chartier, 2018).

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that photographs are, indeed, an accessible method that can be used to understand lived experience with loss. Participants did not identify any practical procedural obstacles to capturing the photographs. Each had access to a camera and each captured photographs that they thought best described their experience of loss. As with all visual data, the findings of this study illustrate the projective nature of photography. Heisley and

Levy (1991) discussed a hierarchy of abstraction as proposed by Collier and Collier (as cited in Heisley & Levy, 1991), which described photographs as the lowest level of abstraction, lacking deep psychological responses and free association. However, photographs were also considered to represent some aspect of an individual's life. Though there appears to be a prototypical expression of grief within visual tropes identified in the structure, content, and effect of the photographs, loss is certainly an individual process. In interview, the photographs ultimately promoted dialogue on a difficult to discuss topic (Dadgostari & Chartier, 2018). Such finding was also similar to that of memorial tattoos (Davidson & Duhig, 2016), in which participants created meaning in their loss by the telling and retelling of their story.

There are several considerations that may affect the results of this study, which warrant discussion. The researcher primarily responsible for data analysis was very familiar with the verbal data used in the broad research project. That is, knowing the interview data may have influenced coding of the visual data. It was challenging to isolate the researcher's knowledge of of what the photograph was intended to represent and to focus on the visual alone. To mitigate such challenges, we attempted to analyse the results in a manner that did not rely heavily on interpretation of meaning. However, similar future research should consider analysing visual data prior to engaging participants in interviews to decrease such contamination.

Although participants were asked to report exclusively on significant deaths in their lives, our earlier study (Dadgostari & Chartier, 2018) indicated that participants also discussed non-death related loss. The inclusion criteria of the present study attempted to account for those individuals who reported extensively on a non-death loss, but we still included those who may have briefly talked about a non-death loss. In fact, it was rare that an individual spoke exclusively about *one* significant death. Although such limitations can easily be accounted for in

verbal data by excluding portions that are irrelevant to the research question, the same cannot be done with visual data. That is, we were unable to distinguish from the photographs alone if the photograph was taken to represent a death or if it was taken to represent other types of losses (e.g., loss of job, loss of pet). Future research should consider instructing participants to focus exclusively on one significant death and not more generally on all death experiences.

Like art, the photographs are in the eye of the beholder and, as such, are idiosyncratic expressions. Yet such expressions are influenced by various personal factors, making them projective in nature. That being said, based on the findings of our earlier study (Dadgostari & Chartier, 2018), participants connected the photographs to their personal narrative. It may be likely that the atypical photographs were influenced by the fact that participants had experienced a significant loss, which likely affected or changed their lives. Future research should consider comparing those photographs taken to represent death and loss in general to those photographs taken to represent one meaningful death-related loss.

It is also important to consider the time and place in which the data collection phase of the project occurred. Participants were recruited for the research project at the beginning of the fall term. Most participants completed an interview between October and November in a western Canadian city. It may be likely that the number of photographs of changing seasons, including photographs of fallen leaves and dead trees may be a product of the time in which the participants were asked to take photographs.

Future research should consider the characteristics associated with individuals who use different tropes and the role that certain socio-cultural practices play in their day-to-day lives. Do bereaved students provide photographs to fit the "good" bereaved participant or do they provide such photographs because it is difficult to challenge the status quo of a "good" bereaved

individual? In addition, future research might examine whether certain individuals are more likely to use a particular trope, and include how various theoretical ideas, such as the continuing bonds theory, might be examined in relationship to these tropes.

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Figure 4.1: "You remain so close no matter how far." This photograph illustrates the use of colour contrast in grief photography.

Figure 4.2: "Someone missing." This photograph illustrates the use of visual distortion.

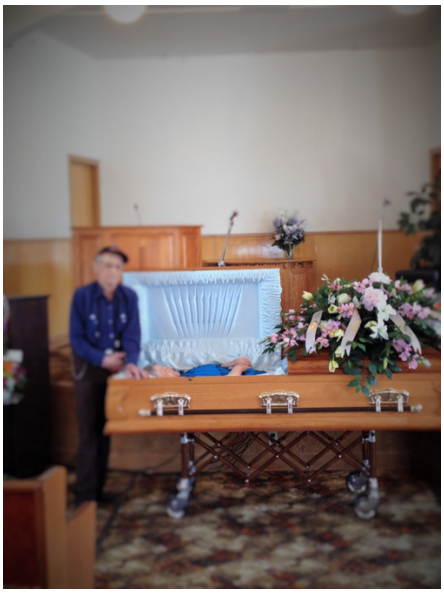

Figure 4.3: "Tragic severance." This photograph illustrates a bereaved man standing by a casket, which is a common Western trope.

Figure 4.4: "Looking at the future without the deceased feels scary and lonely, like this leaf, which hangs on as tight as possible afraid to fall by itself." This photograph illustrates the use of changing seasons as metaphor.

Figure 4.5: "The feeling you get when you see their empty room." This photograph reflects an empty space as a result of the death.

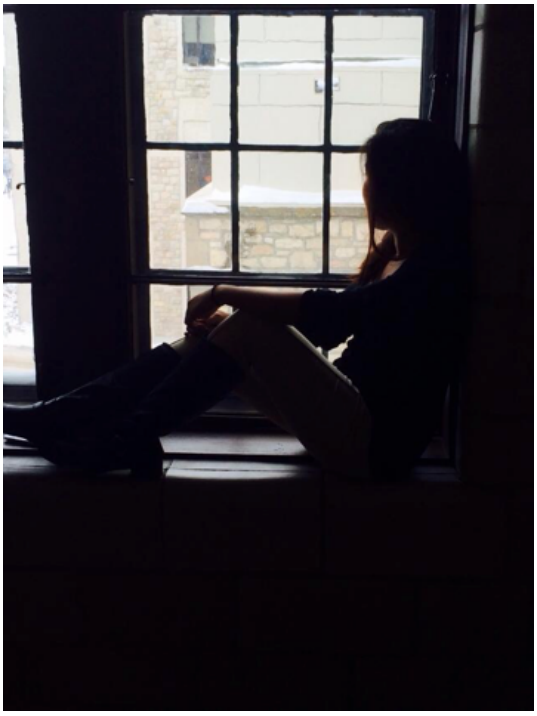

Figure 4.6: "And to accept the fact that as I look forward to my future, she won't be a part of it anymore." This photograph illustrates the use of metaphor to represent a gaze into the unknown.

Figure 4.7: "To your former glory." This photograph illustrates the use of mementos.

Figure 4.8: The Feather. This photograph illustrates both the flow of life and the ephemeral aspect of a life.

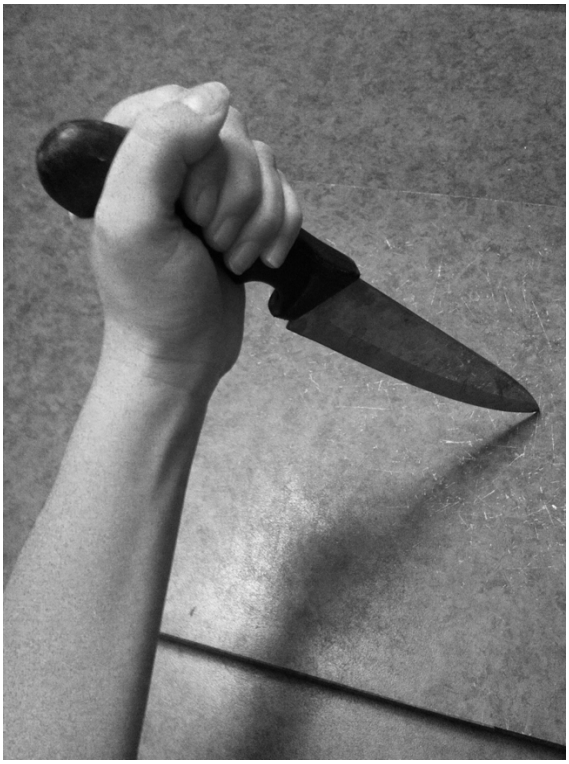

Figure 4.9: “It feels like you were stabbed when you find out that they died.” This photograph illustrates the use of provocation.

Figure 4.10: “The world outside my window refuses to slow, to wait, to stop.” This photograph illustrates how such a raw image can elicit empathy from the observer.

Figure 4.11: “This was his vehicle, it was a head-on collision with a semi.” This photograph illustrates how such a shocking image can elicit an emotional reaction in the observer.

CHAPTER 5: General Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter provides a discussion of the research project. Particular focus is given to a brief summary of each study and general conclusions. Personal reflexivity is revisited as informed by the completion of this project. The unique contributions of this project including the general strengths and limitations are also reviewed. Finally, clinical implications and future research directions are also discussed.

5.1 Summary of Findings

5.1.1 Chapter 2

Study one focused on the way in which female university students talked about the death of a family member or friend in their lives. Broadly, the women had a tendency to use strategies that can be captured within four central layers of grief talk. The layers of grief talk may best be understood as interwoven. At one end of the spectrum of their grief talk is the sanitised script or that which afforded participants social approval. Such approval was learned from previous interactions with their social networks and is what was likely to protect them from emotional pain. The sanitised script was, at some time, valuable and effective for these women, as it may have facilitated support and acceptance. Otherwise, the women risked positioning themselves as different from their peer group, likely to lead to a sense of social alienation.

As the interviews progressed, the participants used a more personal script that moved away from the normative language and reliance on broad-meaning systems towards a language that evolved through the influence of the research interview. It is important to note the assumption here is not that there exists non-public scripts occurring in the individual's thoughts or experiences. Rather, we concluded that the sanitised script is "put on" despite the greater complexity or personal identification with a private retelling of their lived experience with loss.

5.1.2 Chapter 3

Study two focused specifically on *what* the photo-production method enabled bereaved students to do and *how* the method produced such results within the context of a research interview. Indeed, the results of manuscript two suggested that the photo-production method allowed bereaved students to experience power, freedom, and control when they shared the story of their loss. This process of sharing was transformative, exposed emotion within participants during the interview, and enabled them to process their loss at a deeper level. As a result, the photo-production method provided students with a platform from which to discuss a socially unaccepted experience, loss, and contributed to a beneficial environment for the bereaved students who participated in this research study.

5.1.3 Chapter 4

Study three focused exclusively on the visual data produced by the bereaved students. In general, the photographs were incredibly diverse. Some participants submitted photographs that were structurally sophisticated, suggesting that they had engaged in some post-hoc editing. The content of photographs ranged from typical to atypical representations of death and loss in Western culture and participants used both in their submissions. For photographs where the content was clear, the participants captured objects that were very commonly associated with death whereas mementos were not as obvious and required narration. Rarely did the photographs capture the practical facets of grief. Additionally, some photographs elicited emotional and cognitive reactions in the observer, and were received as provocative, raw, and shocking.

Overall, there did not appear to be a prototypical expression of grief within the photographs. That is, the idiosyncratic meaning of grief was most evident in the results of this study and reinforces that the meaning of loss is an individual process. There does not appear to

be a collective unconscious or collectivity to grief photography with individuals who have experienced a significant death in their lives.

5.2 Discussion

Early theorists like Freud (1922) pathologised normal reactions to grief. In those times, pathological reactions to loss, such as melancholia, were thought to end only when the relationship to the deceased was completely severed. The process of severing any emotional ties to a deceased loved one was considered to be a healthy resolution to grief (Freud, 1922). Modern-day theorists, however, have not supported the need to sever the relationship to the deceased. Rather, these theorists posit that continuing the bond by maintaining a connection and relationship with the deceased person is a healthy way to integrate loss into the survivor's life (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). The results of this dissertation highlight the debate between severing the connection to the deceased and continuing a relationship with the deceased.

Bereaved post-secondary students were not able to completely sever their emotional relationship with a deceased loved one. Rather, the photo-production method promoted the construction and reconstruction of a relationship with the deceased person that was maintained throughout the interview. Grief had not ended at any point for these participants. Their emotional and cognitive reactions to the loss were very real in the moments in which they were asked to reflect on their loss. Simply asking participants to take photographs connected them to the deceased person via objects in their everyday life. Grief work did not just end. People in various points post-loss experienced their grief in interview and the photo-production method enabled grief work beyond the ways in which participants had already made sense of the loss.

Making meaning of a loss by fitting the event into their assumptions about how the world works is a difficult cognitive process (Neimeyer, 2000). For theorists like Neimeyer (2000), the

cognitive process involved in grief work is emphasised far more than that which is experienced emotionally. Death is considered to significantly contribute to a revision in one's self-identify based on how one cognitively constructs the death (Balk, 2001; Hogan & DeSantis, 1996; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). The results of study one provide some support for Neimeyer's (2000) meaning-making theory. Loss does change people's assumptions about the world and it certainly impacted how participants functioned in their day-to-day lives. The metanarrative provided by participants explained how they fit the loss in their lives and how the loss fit with who they were. Thus, it is not that difficult to start to make sense of the death and fit it into their lives when they are given a safe environment to explore their thoughts and emotions surrounding the death. The conclusions of this dissertation emphasise that bereaved post-secondary students need a platform to engage in this type of grief work since they do not receive the support and engage in the meaning making process simply from exploring the loss with their peer group.

Perhaps what was most significant, however, was the impact of the loss on their social functioning. The results of study one, much like what was posited by Neimeyer (2000), emphasised the significant impact that bereavement had on interpersonal relationships. The bereaved participants reconstructed their position from daughter, friend, and partner to someone who was alienated, different, and weird from their peer group. The bereaved negotiated these positions into their self-identities based on the feedback they obtained from their peer group and they were required to cope with an emotionally taxing process. For many of these participants they coped via avoidance. The conclusions of this dissertation suggest that bereaved post-secondary students need to push beyond social expectation to get to a level in which they are making-meaning of their loss. It raises the assumption that perhaps making meaning of such tragedies is difficult for young adults because they rely so heavily on their peer group. As

identified in the results of study one, consistent with previous research (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010), there are many complications associated with relying on a peer group including the risk of becoming alienated and socially rejected. Peer groups do not know how to mitigate a friend's grief and the bereaved have learned this through negative feedback from their social interactions. What is interesting here is that although current grief theorists do not pathologise normal grief as early theorists, most other people do and this was evident in how the bereaved perceived peer support.

Stroebe and Schut (1999) proposed that the role of grief work involves coping with loss in a manner that is both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented. The dual process theory explains that by both confronting the loss and restoring life (i.e., oscillation), habituation occurs from the repeated exposure and confrontation, and grief diminishes. Although the conclusions of this dissertation cannot speak directly to the process of oscillation, they highlight one important finding: the photo-production method was a way in which people confronted the loss. It was exposure different from other types of exposure that participants had experienced thus far and many participants reported that they had never talked about the loss in the way that they did in interview.

These participants faced significant losses that in some cases were quite traumatic. Consistent with that proposed by Bonanno (2004), many bereaved individuals are able to overcome the negative impacts of loss in their lives. The participants in this dissertation were post-secondary students who were successfully enrolled in university courses. They were goal-oriented and future-focused even though some had experienced horrific changes to their world assumptions via death. Thus, these participants were ultimately a very resilient group.

This conclusion is consistent with the work of Frazier and colleagues (2009). They found that post-secondary students will cognitively construct a loss as the worst event in their lives. The conclusions of this dissertation suggest that the impact of loss is also grave. For bereaved participants in this dissertation, the loss affected their peer relationships, including how they related to others, how they related to the world, and how they fit the loss into their lives. Although the participants were resilient overall and led generally healthy lives, the process of grief was difficult.

Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) reported that post-secondary students often feel unheard and misunderstood and as a result they will avoid relying on their peer group for social support. The conclusions of this dissertation are consistent with this previous research. As noted earlier, participants avoided talking to their peer group openly and honestly because of their history of invalidation and fear of social rejection. However, we need to consider how much participants' own social expectation (i.e., rejection) hindered the ability for someone else to understand them. The results of study one suggest that 10 pictures and an hour discussion can break through such hindrance. Consistent with the findings presented by Balk (1997), in which most individuals report a positive experience talking about their loss, participants in this dissertation also reported a positive experience talking about their loss in the interview. In contrast to Balk who found that most students speak to their mothers, participants in this study reported a positive experience talking to a stranger, i.e., the interviewer. Ultimately, the conclusions of this dissertation suggest that talking about the loss was cathartic for bereaved post-secondary students as it enabled meaning making and a continuing bond to the deceased person through the identification with personal objects in their environment that linked to a memory of the deceased that might otherwise have not been fostered.

5.3 General Conclusions

Recruiting participants from an undergraduate Psychology of Death and Dying course undoubtedly attracted individuals who were looking to solve issues related to grief. An examination across the three studies suggests that bereaved post-secondary students sought meaning in their loss and this was facilitated by experiencing and re-experiencing the loss within the research interview. As participants provided a metanarrative for their experience and moved in and out of emotional states, they developed new cognitive assumptions. Researchers suggest that a bereaved individual's psychological well-being benefits greatly from making sense of loss and fitting loss into their assumptive worlds (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

From a predominantly psychological perspective, however, meaning making is often considered to be a private process (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008). An examination of post-interview commentary made by participants suggested that participants had, indeed, experienced a transformation. The transformation gave participants insight into their experience and ultimately contributed to a beneficial environment. The therapy-like effect provided by the environment was significant across all three studies as students took what was cognitively considered the most painful experience of their lives and shared this experience openly with a stranger.

The photo-production methodology also gave insight into the utility of visual images in research. Early researchers proposed a hierarchy of abstraction (Collier and Collier as cited in Heisley & Levy, 1991) and photographs were considered to be the lowest level of abstraction that lacked deep psychological responses and free association. Although Heisley and Levy (1991) ultimately acknowledged that photographs were also true representations of an individual's life, the findings of this dissertation suggest that photographs serve a far greater

purpose. That is, photographs are not merely a low level of abstraction but a tool that can be used to facilitate a discussion about a taboo and often unexplored topic: grief.

5.4 Personal Reflexivity Revisited

In chapter one, I identified the ways in which who I am might affect the development of this research project and how it was subsequently analysed and interpreted. Having completed the research project, I believe I can speak in more detail to these issues. I was first drawn to this research based on my clinical experience working with youth involved with the criminal justice system. In my work with these youth, traumatic loss was extremely prevalent and problematic. At the same time that I was experiencing considerable difficulty obtaining a sample of young offenders for a research study, the initial study with post-secondary students that I conducted yielded rich data. Since the data collected from this initial study suggested that loss in post-secondary students was a worthy area of investigation, I decided to continue working with post-secondary students. I did this knowing that, ultimately, I wanted to be able to use this methodology in my clinical work.

As a result of my clinical experiences primarily working with offender populations and the traumatic nature of their losses, I had a tendency to give more of my attention to those participants in this study who experienced a traumatic loss. It is likely that I gave these participants more weight, not only because of my own interest in the topic, but because I assumed that these losses were more significant. However, as I mentioned in chapter one, I experienced my own loss over the course of this dissertation. Though my loss was not traumatic, I came to really appreciate that each loss has its own impact on each individual person. From that point forward, I attempted to see my data in that way.

In addition to my invested interest in traumatic loss, I also had a special interest in examining the way in which women experienced death. Such interest is likely a factor of my own gender. I recognise that I have not looked specifically at men, or asked gender-related questions of male participants that may have increased my understanding of any gender-based differences in grief that may exist.

In reflecting on this research project, I recognise that throughout this process my training in clinical psychology also likely affected the way in which I developed this research project, interacted with participants, and analysed the data. Indeed, on many occasions I found myself struggling to recognise which "hat" I was wearing. I believe that I had a tendency to rely heavily on my clinical judgement based on what appeared clinically relevant for the participant. Additionally, in many ways I felt that I was opening up a traumatic wound that I also needed to tend to. In part, I believe that this pull for clinical support is associated with the nature of this topic. I was mindful that I did not want to do a disservice to the participants by having them divulge their lived experiences and then leave them with nothing. As a result, I struggled at times to recognise the difference between research and therapy. Such struggles may have also influenced by beliefs about the therapeutic nature of this process, not simply because of the methodology but also because of the role I attempted to play.

Additionally, I assumed that in order to be non-judgmental and to be true to the participant's experience, I could not use a structured set of questions. I placed value in going where the participant thought was important. In this way, I may have missed key points that may have informed this research project on a broader level.

5.5 Unique Contribution

The unique contribution of this dissertation is that it joins the study of grief and loss with photography in a systematic and empirical manner. To my knowledge, no other research studies have used photo-production to better understand grief with any population. Additionally, no studies have examined the discourse of bereaved female university students. The death and dying literature has primarily been dominated by quantitative research methods for the past few decades in an attempt to create theories to capture the normative grieving trajectory. Indeed, the work of this dissertation contributes greatly to an area in psychology that has been neglected in the research literature. That is, the focus on individual experience and how the experience can be investigated in a manner that produces a rich understanding of the phenomenon.

As mentioned earlier, grief and how it is expressed is a socially constructed phenomenon. What is unique to this research is that the method of photo-production begins to construct grief in a different manner than in interview. That is, we have a social understanding of grief and the participants in this study initially approached the interviews with these same social understandings of how grief should be expressed to others. Despite this common understanding, the research method allowed participants to reconstruct their view of grief into a more intimate and personal cognitive and emotional experience.

5.6 Limitations

There are several limitations to this dissertation worth considering. There were considerable challenges with the recruitment process. Although obtaining participants to interview from a Psychology of Death and Dying course was easy, a relatively low number of these participants met the inclusion criteria. Such low numbers may have been a factor of the compensation offered to participants, regardless of whether or not they met the inclusion criteria.

As a result, students may have chosen to participate in an interview because they believed that the interview would be "easier" than writing a research paper for class credit, even though they had not experienced a loss significant to their lives. Additionally, some participants were simply more genuinely engaged in the process and demonstrated an emotional investment in the lost relationship while other participants did not.

The focus of this dissertation was intended to be on young adults who were enrolled in post-secondary education. Although the majority of participants were between the ages of 19 and 23, there were two outliers included in the sample of bereaved students, including a student who was 46 at the time of the interview. Although the death occurred when she was a young adult, the life experiences of this mature student may have influenced the way in which she described the loss in her life when compared to younger participants.

In addition to the limitations with the participants, there were challenges with the methodology. First, there is no well-formed or researched methodology designed to analyse visual data in psychology. As a result, study three was particularly challenging and might not have reached a latent level of analysis that is often desired in qualitative research. Additionally, the visual data were analysed after all of the interview data were analysed. As a result, familiarity with the data set might have inadvertently affected the analysis of study three.

5.7 Clinical Implications

Researchers have, for some time, identified multiple factors that influence post-secondary students' access to adequate emotional support when bereaved. For some students, their geographic distance to home while away at school is an obstacle to accessing their peer support system (Fajgenbaum, Chesson & Lanzi, 2012). The results of this dissertation suggest that, although distance may be an obstacle, it is less significant when considering the nature of the

support they receive, when, and if, they do receive it. As Servaty-Seib and Taub (2010) reported, peer support that is received during times of grief can negatively change the peer relationship. Bereaved students interviewed for this dissertation expressed significant reluctance to engage with their peer support group because of the negative interactions they feared they would have received. However, despite access to formal counselling through the university counselling centre, very few participants in this dissertation reported that they sought professional support during their loss. This finding is similar to U.S. studies that cited less than 16 percent of students will visit a counsellor for any reason, let alone bereavement (Cox, Dean, & Kowalski, 2015). Students at this university did not have access to peer-led grief support groups on campus. Such initiatives are still fairly new to the U.S. (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012). Developing opportunities for bereaved students at Canadian universities to access non-traditional counselling support while bereaved is critical.

The collective results of this dissertation have an important clinical implication: the method may have use as a one-hour intervention. Indeed, participants reported that their participation in the interview felt like a therapy or intervention session. Within that hour in interview, participants moved from reluctance to much more meaningful interaction and an apparently improved understanding of their own grief. Clinically, there is a beneficial effect of reviewing photographs as a way to explore grief. For some participants, it was beneficial to create the pictures. For most participants, it was therapeutic to explore incompletely understood feelings. For others, it was allowing them to freely explore and construct meaning. In addition, the perceived empathy of the procedure was positively received by most participants.

One conclusion of this dissertation is that bereaved females think they have to abide by norms when discussing grief, asking them to process their loss opened the door to a more

personalised discourse of their lived experience with loss. As a result of the findings in this dissertation, we cannot assume that there is a beginning and an ending to grief, as was once assumed by many theorists. Indeed, grief, regardless of when the death occurred as evidenced by the diversity in time of death for participants of this dissertation, goes on. The assumption that grief is ongoing has a significant clinical implication. That is, we cannot assume that the same model of intervention can be used for all those who are grieving. As such, manualised treatment may not meet the needs of this population and may be worth noting given these findings. However, the photo-production method, which allowed participants to personalise their experience and increased their agency to choose what they shared and how they shared it, is a strength in this method as a potential future intervention with similarly bereaved individuals.

Additionally, although this dissertation focused specifically on bereaved university students, it is likely applicable to a larger population including those individuals who seek therapeutic services in the community. This method proved to be useful in building rapport because it was less threatening than an interview alone.

5.8 Future Research

Given the findings of this dissertation, additional studies are needed to examine photo-production methods with bereaved individuals. For example, it will be informative to address whether the use of photographs created a less intrusive atmosphere that was conducive to disclosure than interview questioning alone. Comparisons to other photo-elicitation methods may also contribute to an area in psychology research that has been thus far vastly neglected. Perhaps different findings would be obtained if participants were asked to bring in existing photographs (e.g., family photo albums) than producing their own photographs.

This dissertation did not focus on differences in grief given the amount of time since death. One student's friend had died within weeks of participating in this research. Another student happened to participate in the interview on a day that marked the 20th death anniversary of her romantic partner. Did their grief look different? Future research may want to consider such differences and this may be best approached using a combined quantitative-qualitative study to factor in time. For example, this method can be explored with young people at particular points in their grief as defined by time since death or by another measure of grief, such as the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Using the Dual Process Model, future studies can examine the differences for participants who are engaged in a loss-orientation, overwhelmed by the intrusion of grief in interview as compared to others where the interview process is more likely to induce a restoration-orientation that focuses on life change following the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Future research should consider how such factors as time play a part in how grief is expressed.

In conjunction with time as a factor for grief expression, participants in this research completed interviews approximately four years ago. What would the meta-narratives and photographs produced by these participants look like today? Future research should consider how a longitudinal study can contribute additionally to understanding the grief trajectory and explore whether the meaning making was sustained and related to more positive grief outcomes.

This dissertation did not allow for the use of photographs of faces. However, some participants included photographs of faces likely because of the importance of including such photographs. Thus, future research may want to consider the ethical factors regarding photographs of others in an attempt to include such photographs. It may also be of benefit to

study the parallels between photo-production and the use of pre-existing photographs (e.g., photo albums).

Study one focused exclusively on bereaved women to the exclusion of the grief discourse expressed by male students. Given that research has identified some differences in grieving styles between men and women (Doka & Martin, 2010), future research should consider the use of this methodology to study bereaved men.

Death is a very challenging topic to discuss and that is well-documented in the research literature. Given that the implications of this study demonstrated therapy-like properties of the method, it is worth future exploration. In particular, future research should examine the photo-production method as a part of an intervention delivered to bereaved individuals. It may also be worthwhile to focus on non-verbal populations who struggle to articulate their personal experience and who have historically been identified as marginalised populations that struggle significantly with traumatic loss.

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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

Photography and the Meaning of Loss
Participant Consent Form

Contact Information:
Tina Dadgostari, B.A. (Hons) | Ph.D. Clinical Psychology Student
Department of Psychology | University of Saskatchewan | 9 Campus Drive, 154 Arts Building
tina.dadgostari@usask.ca

Brian Chartier, Ph.D., R. Psych.
Associate Professor | Department of Psychology | University of Saskatchewan
St. Thomas More College | 131 St. Thomas More College
brian.chartier@usask.ca | 306-966-8948

Purpose and Objectives of the Research Project:
The purpose of the research project is to understand the impact of death in the lives of young adults in post-secondary educational institutions. The data obtained will also be one component of a Ph.D. dissertation research program.

Potential Risks:
Participants may experience psychological or emotional discomfort as they reflect on their personal experiences with death and loss. If distressed, participants may contact:

U of S Student Health and Counselling Services 306-966-4920 or visit
http://students.usask.ca/current/life/health/
Saskatoon Mental Health and Addictions Services 306-655-4100 or visit
http://www.saskatoonhealthregion.ca/
Family Service Saskatoon 306-244-0127 or visit
http://www.familyservice.sk.ca/contact/index.html
Catholic Family Services 306-244-7773 or visit http://www.cfssaskatoon.sk.ca/counselling.html

Participants may experience legal repercussions if they do not follow the research project instructions and include photographs of illicit behaviour. In this case, there is a duty to report any behaviour in the photographs that appear to bring harm to a minor, yourself, or others. Although participants are to document their life experiences, they must exclude, or make unrecognizable, any photographs of faces. By doing so, participants help protect the identity, privacy, and anonymity of participants and non-participants in the research project.

Potential Benefits:
Photography is an unobtrusive method that may provide a more realistic depiction of an individual's reality by giving the participant control over what they contribute to the research

project. In addition, the research study may enhance the psychological well-being of participants by allowing them an opportunity to discuss their experience with loss.

Confidentiality:
Your participation in this research project is voluntary and the data you submit will remain confidential. During the interview with the researcher you will be asked about the photographs you captured. The interview will take approximately 1 to 2 hour(s). The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed; the interview and transcript will be confidential with any personally identifying information removed in any subsequent use. That is, photographs, direct quotes from interview transcripts, and the results of the study may be used in professional conference presentations, poster presentations or peer-reviewed journal articles. Electronic copies of the assignments received by the researcher will be de-identified and stored by Dr. Brian Chartier for six years.

Right to Withdraw:
Your participation is voluntary and you may answer only those questions with which you are comfortable. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your class standing or how you will be treated. Should you wish to withdraw, please contact tina.dadgostari@usask.ca and the data you have submitted will be destroyed. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until **January 1, 2015.** After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Follow up:
To obtain results from the study, please contact tina.dadgostari@usask.ca

Questions or Concerns:
If you have any questions or concerns regarding your participation in the research project, please contact tina.dadgostari@usask.ca. This research project has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

I,_____, have reviewed the consent form and understand that by attending and providing the time for this interview, and completing the questionnaire indicates that I understand the above conditions of participation in this study.

_____ _____
Signature of Participant *Date*

_____ _____
Researcher's Signature *Date*

Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

Photography and the Meaning of Loss:
Exploring your loss experiences through commentary on photos

I, _____, have reviewed the transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and/or delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Tina Dadgostari. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Tina Dadgostari to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

_____ _____
Name of Participant Date

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Signature of researcher

Appendix C

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM
Declaration Declining to Review My Transcript

Photography and the Meaning of Loss:
Exploring your loss experiences through commentary on photos

I, _____, have been offered the opportunity to review the transcript of my interview for this study. I hereby decline this opportunity and authorize the release of this transcript, when it is completed, to Tina Dadgostari to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Transcript Release Form for my own records.

_____ _____
Name of Participant Date

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Signature of researcher

Appendix D

Assignment Instructions:

Alternative Experiential-Integrative Assignment

"Photography and the Meaning of Loss: Exploring your loss experiences through commentary on photos"

INSTRUCTIONS: This research project has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. If you are NOT submitting this assignment for class credit, do only Part A. If you are submitting this assignment for class credit, do Parts A and B.

PART A: For this assignment you will be required to reflect on the impact that death has had on your life experience.

STEP (1) You will be required to take 10 photographs that capture your lived experience with death. DO NOT use photos from the internet. You are encouraged to be creative and consider symbolism in the photographs you capture. Take the time to reflect on your experience. You may consider, though are not limited to the following questions:

- How is this photograph relevant to my loss?
- How is this photograph relevant to my life?
- What is really happening here?
- What impact has death had on my life experience?
- How has death affected me negatively?
- How has death affected me positively?
- What are some common issues or themes that I see from the collective photographs I captured?
- What have I not been able to capture in my photograph?

STEP (2) Upload your photographs into a word document (.doc or .docx). Ensure that you maintain the quality of the photographs during this process.

STEP (3) Above each photograph, include a title. This may be a few words or one sentence that creatively captures the photograph and your interpretation.

STEP (4) Email your document to tina.dadgostari@usask.ca. The subject line of your email should read: "PSY207 Research Project". In your email, include 3 days and times that you are available for an interview. Please choose a time and that does not conflict with any other commitments (i.e., classes or appointments). The interview will take approximately 1 to 2 hours. For example: "I am available Mondays (12pm to 3pm), Thursdays (3pm to 6pm), and Saturdays (10am to 4pm)." We will work together to coordinate a time to meet. Prior to the appointment, you will be emailed a short questionnaire to complete and return by email.

STEP (5) Attend the research interview - appointments will be made by email for an in-person interview. On the day of the interview you will be asked to sign a consent form to participate in the research project, complete a brief 5 minute demographic questionnaire if it has not been completed, and participate in a 1 to 2 hour interview. All interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Once interviews are transcribed, you will be asked by email to review the transcript in order to add, alter, or delete information from the transcript as appropriate. You may decline to review the transcript.

PART B: If you wish to complete this assignment in place of one of your class assignments, you must complete the following form. On this form, you are to describe what this experience has been like for you – that is, what was your reaction to taking the photos and speaking about that experience.

Note: In your photographs, do not take pictures of faces that may identify individuals. In your writing, please do not identify people about whom you are writing. That is, use appropriate and respectful pseudonyms for yourself and others.

Compensation: Completion of the following form may be submitted in place of **one** of the four class assignments or may be submitted as a bonus assignment – see the class outline.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact tina.dadgostari@usask.ca. In the subject line of the email please include "PSY207 Research Project."

Appendix E

Form for Class Credit:

Name: _____

Student Number: _____

Date of Interview: _____

I have completed the above research study and submit this form to indicate that I wish that my participation in this study be used for credit in place of Assignment # _____. I understand that I will receive full credit for this assignment once I have completed the study and have answered the questions below.

_____
Signature

1. What was your reaction to taking the photos and speaking about that experience?

_____
_____
_____
_____

2. What did you like about participating in this study?

_____
_____
_____
_____

3. What did you dislike about participating in this study?

_____
_____
_____
_____

4. What did you learn about your experiencing death/bereavement/loss was in this study?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix F

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

Photography and the Meaning of Loss
Bereavement Questionnaire

ID Code: _____ **Date:** _____

1. Birth date _____
   (mm/dd/yyyy)

2. Gender (please highlight)
   a. Female
   b. Male

3. Your ethnic background, please specify: _____ or choose one of the following:
   a. Unknown
   b. Decline to answer

4. Before I came to university, I was living in:
   a. The city (e.g., Saskatoon), please specify: _____
   b. On a reserve, please specify: _____
   c. A rural community or town: _____

The next questions asks whether you have ever lost someone to death, and to provide details about who you lost, how they died, and when it occurred. Please follow the example:

EXAMPLE:
I have lost through death…

Deceased Loved One	How did it happen?	Approximate date of death
Close Friend	Car accident	March 2013
Grandfather	Cancer	October 2005

5. I have lost through death…

Deceased Loved One	How did it happen?	Approximate date of death

**Add rows as needed*

6. Since the death(s) I have talked about my loss (please highlight):

a. Always
b. Often
c. Sometimes
d. Rarely
e. Never

7. My loss changed my life (please highlight):
   a. Enormously
   b. A lot
   c. Some
   d. A little
   e. It didn't change my life much

8. I got over my loss (please highlight):
   a. Straight away
   b. Quickly
   c. Slowly
   d. I never got over it
   e. I don't know

9. My loss made me feel (highlight all that apply):
   a. Angry
   b. Confused
   c. Sad
   d. I didn't feel anything
   e. Other: _____

10. I would like programs that help me talk about and understand my loss (please highlight):
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Comments:_____

11. I would like to speak to a professional about my loss:
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Comments:_____

12. Please indicate any additional comments you have regarding the research project in the space below. This may include what you liked, what you disliked and any suggestions you have to improve the research project. Your comments will be considered when designing future research projects.

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix G

Clarification of Instructions Response Email Script:

Hello (participant),

I am looking to study the experience of loss with post-secondary students (like you!) using a unique qualitative methodology (i.e., photomethods). I'm asking students to help me understand what the impact or experience of death has been like in your lives. Rather than simply have you sit down in an interview with me where I ask you what will likely seem like "random questions," I'm asking you to do a little bit of work beforehand.

1. Take 10 photographs (yourself, with any camera) that you will share with me to help me understand. I encourage you to be creative with these pictures, to think outside-the-box, take photographs of whatever speaks to *you*. I want to stress that you do not by any means need to be an "artistic" individual – that's not what I'm looking for and before you judge the quality of your pictures (which has often been the case in the past), please know that I'll respect your contribution. Please DO NOT use photographs from the internet (i.e. google images). It is very important to the study that the photographs you share with me are your own, that you have personally captured. You may include pictures of people, if you wish, with the stipulation that they need to remain unidentifiable. There are a number of inventive ways that participants have "blurred" faces, or made them unrecognizable. I'll leave that to you.

2. Upload the photographs into a word document, making sure that you maintain the quality of the photographs during this process. The reason I need to make sure the quality of the photo is in-tact is that I may use your photographs for research publications (posters, articles, presentations, etc.) and blurry photos don't do justice! Although this is something I will go over with you when we do the consent, I want to reiterate that everything you share with me (photographs and during the interview) will be de-identified and remain confidential. That means that your name and information is private and others who read about my research will not be able to trace the photographs directly back to you.

3. Once you have taken the photographs, come up with a title for each photo. Have fun with this part!

4. Email me back with the word document that contains the photographs. The subject line of your email should read: "PSY207 Research Project". In your email, include 3 days and times that you are available for an interview. Please choose a time that does not conflict with any other commitments (i.e., classes or appointments). The interview will take approximately 1-2 hours. For example: "I am available Mondays (12pm-3pm), Thursdays (3pm-6pm), and Saturdays (10am-4pm)." We will work together to coordinate a time to meet. When I hear from you, I will email you a short questionnaire (the same one you'll find in your syllabus) to complete and return by email.

5. Finally, we meet for an interview where we will chat as I ask you about your photographs. I will have your photographs on my iPad so don't worry about printing them off. The interview is unstructured and usually takes 1-2 hours. Please note that the interview will be audiorecorded.

This is so that later on I can have them transcribed (i.e., typed out) and ready for data analysis! Once interviews are transcribed, you will be asked by email to review the transcript in order to add, alter, or delete information from the transcript as appropriate. You may decline to review the transcript.

If you are participating in the research project in the place of one of your class assignments, you also need to complete the form that is in your syllabus. I don't anticipate the form will take you very long – but make sure you complete it so that you can get the credit for your assignment.

Best,
Tina Dadgostari

Appendix H

Response Email Script:

Hello (participant),

Thank you for participating in my study. I am available [**date]** at **[time]** to meet with you at **[location]**. I have attached an electronic copy of the questionnaire to this email. Please email the completed questionnaire back to me before we meet. Although I will review the consent form with you in person, I have also attached an electronic copy to this email for your records. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to email me at tina.dadgostari@usask.ca.

Best,
Tina Dadgostari